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In Search of Xerxes: Images of the Persian King

Emma Elizabeth Clough

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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University of Durham

2003

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ABSTRACT

In Search of Xerxes: Images of the Persian King

Thesis submitted by Emma Elizabeth Clough for the degree of Ph.D. in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Durham in 2003.

The figure of Xerxes, the Persian king who invaded Greece in 480 BC, is known to us primarily through Greek sources and the western inheritors of the Greek tradition. Little Persian evidence from Xerxes' reign survives and our perceptions are, therefore, informed by the image of the king constructed by his enemies whose experience of the Persian Wars was a key moment in their own self-definition. As a result, Xerxes is perceived as the antithesis of all that the Greeks represented: the barbarian despot, a figure to be both feared and mocked. This leads to the marginalisation – both literal and symbolic – of the king even in sources where we might expect him to play a key role in the Persian Wars narrative. My thesis examines the creation and perpetuation of a cultural repertoire within which Xerxes is othered and deprived of a subjective voice. After an examination of the scant Persian evidence for Xerxes' reign, it considers the Greek sources of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, beginning with Aeschylus and Herodotus and moving into discussion of the diverse presentations of Timotheus, Ctesias and the orators and philosophers of fourth-century Athens. Later Greek sources – primarily Diodorus and Josephus – are then studied, before an analysis of the Xerxes-traditions in Roman thought. Finally the figure of Xerxes in Greek writing of the second sophistic period is considered.

CONTENTS

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NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

Standard abbreviations are used for ancient authors and texts, as well as for modern collections of texts.

Abbreviations of journal titles are as in *L'Année Philologique*, except that 'P' has been substituted for 'Ph', in accordance with Anglophone usage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Warm thanks must go first to my supervisors, Edith Hall and Peter Rhodes, for their constant encouragement, advice and moral support, and their extraordinary generosity in sharing both their time and their wisdom.

Funding, for which I am most grateful, was provided by a Durham University Research Studentship and the Ralph Lindsay Scholarship. I would also like to thank staff and fellow students at Durham's Department of Classics and Ancient History for friendship, guidance and good humour. Participants at a conference on the reception of the Persian Wars which I organised in Durham in July 2003 also helped to provide the inspiration which sustained me throughout the final period of writing.

The roots of my enthusiasm for things classical were, however, first planted by Ken Parham at Durham Sixth Form Centre, and later nurtured at Brasenose College, Oxford by Ed Bispham, Llewelyn Morgan, the late Leighton Reynolds, and Greg Woolf. I am indebted to each of them for their faith in me, and can only hope that the present work proves that faith justified.

My parents, Terry and Margaret Clough, deserve a greater share of the credit for the completion of this work than their modesty would allow them to accept; they have been an unfailing source of love and support throughout. Finally, to David Bridges, for whom Xerxes must often have seemed to be the 'other man' in my life – thank you for helping me to fly.

INTRODUCTION

In Search of Xerxes

On 9th April 2003 the world witnessed one of the most striking images of recent years. In a gesture of triumph US troops in Baghdad's central square toppled a giant statue of the former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, from the plinth on which it stood. Exhilarated crowds of waiting Iraqi citizens added their own expressions of contempt for the recently ousted leader, pelting the statue with stones and treading upon the smashed figure. The scene was a reflection of others seen all over Iraq, where posters featuring Saddam were defaced with slogans, statues riddled with bullet-holes, and his royal palaces and headquarters – once significant as centres of his power and wealth – were bombed and looted.

The symbolism of these actions is not difficult to interpret. By defacing and destroying physical representations of the hated oppressor, troops and civilians attempted to erase all trace of the tyrant who had terrorised his own people and who was said to be a threat to world stability. This was *damnatio memoriae* in action; newspapers and television broadcasts made sure that the whole world saw it happen. Saddam Hussein was presented as the antithesis of all that civilisation represents – a brutal and torturous dictator who would stop at nothing in his pursuit of power. Tellingly, the US-led campaign to bring him down was labelled 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'; the coalition forces were presented as upholders of liberty, justice and moral rectitude.

As the opponent of all that is 'right' and 'good', Saddam Hussein is a latter-day representative of the ideological construction of 'self' and 'other' which has its ancient counterpart in a war which took place almost two and a half thousand years ago. For the ancient Greeks, the universal enemy who came to represent a threat to Hellenic culture was Xerxes, the Persian despot who, in an attempt to deprive her of her freedom, invaded Greece in 480 BC. His invasion was to be a defining moment in the creation of the Greeks' own identity. Whilst the circumstances of the 2003 'war on terror' and Xerxes' campaign of 480/479 BC differ in many ways – not least in that Xerxes headed an aggressive invasion, whilst Saddam's own territory was attacked – the cultural responses to the two, in which the enemy leader has been symbolically effaced, are strikingly similar. The invasion of Greece by Xerxes sparked a tradition which was to continue for centuries, and at first glance the king appears to be an all-pervasive presence in ancient literature dealing with the Persian Wars. On closer inspection, however, it will become clear that Xerxes has himself been obliterated to a degree which is far more extreme than anything yet inflicted on the figure of Saddam Hussein.

In contrast to the scenes in Baghdad in 2003, the destruction of the physical symbols of Xerxes' reign did not take place until long after his death, with Alexander the Great's invasion of Persia and destruction of Persepolis. Already by that time, however, a cultural repertoire had been established in which Xerxes, by means of various strategies, was consistently demonised, othered, and banished to the very fringes of discourse relating to his invasion of Greece. The process had begun in the 470s BC, with the dramatic productions of Phrynichus and Aeschylus in the immediate aftermath of the Greeks' victory, and was to

continue for centuries, with western inheritors of the Xerxes-tradition buying wholeheartedly into the orientalising ideology. The process is one which continues even today. The fact that the perpetuation of the Persian Wars tradition was monopolised by the Greek victors – no insight on the invasion from the Persian viewpoint has survived – has meant that no alternative to this obliteration of an objective perspective is available to us.

The way in which western intellectuals think about the east was changed for ever by Edward Said's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978), in which he examined the ideological construction of the Orient by the West. It is a sad irony that Said himself died a week before this thesis was completed. Although his study was based primarily upon post-colonial imperialist narratives, he identified Aeschylus' *Persae* as a foundation text of orientalism, writing that in this play 'It is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries' (p. 57). The observation is one which can be applied to every Greek ideological construction of the figure of Xerxes himself.

The significance of the Persian Wars in relation to Hellenic ethnic self-consciousness has been much-discussed since the publication of Edith Hall's *Inventing the Barbarian* in 1989, and several studies have dealt with the formulation of Greek identities in relation to particular texts or genres – for example, Hartog's *The Mirror of Herodotus* (1988), Harrison's *The Emptiness of Asia* (2000), on Aeschylus' *Persae*, and Loraux's 1986 study of the conventions

of the funeral oration, *The Invention of Athens*. Meanwhile, Miller's *Athens and Persia* (1997) examines the cultural impact of contact with Persia on Athens itself. The figure of the Persian king resurfaces on occasion in all of these works, yet scholarship has so far neglected to produce an exploration of the way in which the reception of Xerxes himself has been shaped by responses to the Persian invasion. Works which do deal specifically with Xerxes – Hignett's *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece* (1963) and Burn's 1984 *Persia and the Greeks*, for example – tend to view his expedition from a largely historical perspective, although recently Pierre Briant's hugely valuable contribution to Achaemenid studies, *From Cyrus to Alexander* (English translation 2002) has paved the way for an approach which considers the ideological factors contributing to the way in which the ancient source material constructs the figure of the Persian king, rather than seeking simply to extract historical 'fact' from the ancient narratives.

Whilst the brilliant work of Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg has examined aspects of the presentation of the king with an eye to the orientalising ideology of the Greek sources[1] there remains a need for a diachronic study which looks at the cultural construction of the image of Xerxes as a continuous process throughout antiquity, considering the varying generic and historical agendas of authors influenced by the Xerxes-traditions. As I will argue here, those traditions are the literary equivalent of the modern-day destruction of Saddam Hussein's statue. My search for the Persian king is one which will result not in the discovery of the 'real' Xerxes – nor does it purport to attempt such a feat – but which will, I hope, bring to light a remarkable process of cultural *damnatio memoriae*.

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[1] See especially Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987 (a), 1989 and 1999.

CHAPTER ONE

Xerxes In His Own Write? The Persian Evidence

It is by now well-acknowledged that our understanding of Xerxes is limited almost entirely to what we are told by sources originating from outside the Persian empire. Their primary concern is the king's humiliating defeat at the hands of the Greeks, and we are therefore forced to try to reconstruct events from the point of view of the victors – never was the old cliché that history is always told by the winners more true than in this instance. Before embarking upon an analysis of the Greek and later western traditions surrounding the figure of the Persian king, however, an insight into what little evidence does remain from the Persian side of events is crucial. We must ask whether it is possible to see beyond the portrayal of Xerxes by the triumphant defenders of Greece, and examine whether the limited Persian sources from the period of his reign contribute anything which can help to produce an image of the 'real' Xerxes.

From the reign of Xerxes we have no personal records, no diary, not even a comprehensive inscription detailing his life's works. Nor has any sort of chronicle written by a contemporary Persian survived (or even one composed after the king's death) giving an account of his life from the perspective of an 'insider'; we are therefore left to deduce what we can from the inscriptions, building works and reliefs which remain from his reign. As noted by Briant (2002, p. 518), there is a significant reduction in the number of available sources on the Persian empire from the reign of Xerxes on; far fewer Babylonian and Egyptian documents have survived than from previous periods, and the

archaeological evidence, the Persepolis treasury tablets[1] and the royal inscriptions tell us only about the building activities of Xerxes.

The situation is complicated too by the modern historiographical tradition relating to the interpretation of Xerxes' inscriptions. As Sancisi-Weerdenburg has pointed out, scholars have too often tended to seek confirmation in the Persian sources for what they 'know' of Xerxes' reign from the Greek sources. She gives the following enlightening example: 'If we know from a (clearly novelistic) tale in the *Histories* that Xerxes had a love-affair...this 'fact' can be used to interpret Xerxes' building policy which leads furthermore to the 'conclusion' that is understandable that the 'Harem' was Xerxes' most impressive building'.[2] Of course this then has implications for the interpretation of Xerxes as an intolerant and brutal tyrant, as contrasted with the less extreme picture of his father presented by Aeschylus, for example.[3] This tendency to look from the outside in, rather than to begin with the Persian material, is the result of centuries of conditioning and is hard to undo. This chapter will ask whether it is possible to hear the voice of Xerxes himself in the Persian sources.

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[1] The Persepolis treasury tablets detail payments for labourers working at the site. For those which date from the reign of Xerxes see Cameron 1948, pp. 98-191 (nos. 10-75). The documents can shed little light on the figure of the king himself; as Cameron (p. 9) writes, 'Contrary to expectations, the documents from the treasury of the royal city of Persepolis...are not of a political nature. There are no treaties, chronicles, annals, letters to or from satraps, or edicts to distant outposts of the realm. Instead, they are specifically "Treasury" documents'.

[2] Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1989, p. 551. Root 1979, pp. 101-3 describes the 'harem' of Xerxes and notes that it has been labelled as such only because the building is located in a relatively secluded position on a low level of the terrace, and because it has a series of identical small compartments in its western extension. There is no independent Persian testimony to corroborate this view.

[3] See below, pp. 44-7.

Darius and the 'creation' of an Achaemenid ideology

Xerxes' father Darius has left us with far more inside evidence from his reign than his successor; it is a necessary preliminary to any study of Xerxes' inscriptions that we must take a brief look at those of Darius in order to give us an insight into the traditions within which Xerxes was working. Darius has left us with an account of the events early in his reign; this appears in the form of an extensive inscription and reliefs found high on a rock face at Behistun. Alongside this numerous other inscriptions from Darius' capital Persepolis and his tomb at Naqš-i Rustam have survived, as well as a vast quantity of written materials in the form of the Persepolis fortification tablets; these record economic transactions, court accounts and private correspondence.[4] Like the treasury tablets of Xerxes' reign, these give a fascinating insight into the economic workings of the Persian empire but shed little light on the figure of the king himself.

It appears from the inscriptional evidence which remains that Darius laid claim to the creation of a new ideology of Achaemenid kingship. Darius was not, of course a descendant of his predecessors Cyrus and Cambyses but, as the Behistun inscription records,[5] had succeeded to the Persian throne after overthrowing a usurper. In order to establish himself and his descendants on that throne he seems to have invented ways of justifying his position. Thus he combined an allegiance to the traditions of the past with innovations in his style

[4] Hallock 1969, pp. 13-69 summarises the content of the Persepolis fortification tablets.
[5] DB 1.26-61. For inscriptions discussed and translations quoted in this chapter, see Kent 1953; the only exception is XPl, which was discovered after Kent's volume was published. For XPl, see Gharib 1968 and Kuhrt 1995, p. 681.

of kingship. For example, Darius' inscriptions used many of the traditional formulae found in earlier Near Eastern texts, and his administrative records continued to use the Elamite language;[6] he also stresses in the Behistun inscription his link with the Achaemenid dynasty, citing his genealogy as evidence that, like Cyrus, he could claim a familial link with the eponymous founder Achaemenes and commenting that 'For this reason we are called Achaemenians. From long ago we have been noble. From long ago our family had been kings.'[7] These assertions of continuity, however, were accompanied by several important innovations. Most obviously, Darius founded a new capital at Persepolis, instead of using Cyrus' capital, Pasargadae. Where the inscriptions were concerned, Darius continued to use the Elamite and Babylonian languages but also added what we now know as Old Persian to make his writings trilingual. It is even thought that he may have claimed to have been the inventor of this language.[8] The repeated invocation of the god Ahuramazda in the inscriptions also seems to have been one of Darius' own particular contributions to the official ideology of the Achaemenid dynasty.

It must be stressed here that any of the royal inscriptions cannot necessarily be taken as evidence for an individual king's personality; they represent the official line, and as such are carefully manufactured pieces of propaganda, designed to project a particular image. This will become crucial when we come to investigate the inscriptional evidence from Xerxes' reign. In spite of this, however, Darius'

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[6] On these examples of continuity with the past see Cameron 1955, pp. 87-8.
[7] DB 1.1-8.
[8] DB 4.88-92. This interpretation rests on the translation of the word *dipīmaiy* as meaning 'script', rather than the inscription itself. See Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1999, p. 92 for a lucid summary of the evidence; she writes that, 'Most...now seem to agree that Darius referred to the script and had given orders to create a new type of writing for his own language'.

Behistun inscription does come far closer to presenting an inside account of the events of his reign than anything found from the reign of Xerxes. The inscription consists of five columns, totalling four hundred and fourteen lines of text, which report the events of the first three years of Darius' reign, describing his accession to the throne and the resistance he overcame, listing the provinces over which he gained control and including the names of individuals who took part as well as the locations of battles, and the months in which these took place. All of this was, of course, accomplished by the favour of the supreme god, Ahuramazda; Darius is said to be a follower of the 'true' (that is, Persian) way and to be opposed to all those who follow the Lie (apparently defined primarily as the rejection of Ahuramazda). The inscription was accompanied by a relief depicting Darius as receiving the submission of individuals representing the countries which he had subdued, and observed by the winged figure of Ahuramazda hovering above.

In the light of the specific information which it gives, and the apparent attention to chronology, cause and effect, the Behistun inscription has been seen as 'the only text in old-Persian that is usually understood as a historiographical text'.[9] Although several of Darius' other inscriptions make reference to the areas over which the king ruled,[10] these do not give specific details which allow us to locate events in their historical context. Other documents refer to building works[11] or restate the ideology of the Achaemenid dynasty in general terms, referring to the protection of Ahuramazda and Darius' commitment to maintaining the true way

[9] Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1999, p. 93.
[10] DPe, DPh, DNa.
[11] DPa, DSf, DSj, DSo, DZc.

and opposing the Lie.[12] As we shall see, the inscriptions of Xerxes follow a very similar pattern.

Like father, like son

Like the inscriptions of his father, those of Xerxes are all written in the first person, as though the king himself were speaking. This use of the 'I' voice might at first suggest that we have the authentic and personal pronouncements of Xerxes himself. It soon becomes clear that, as with Darius, the issue is not so straightforward; here the sense that we are reading not individualised statements by a particular king but formulaic ideological proclamations is even more extreme. Of the inscriptions which survive, several consist only of one or two lines and were found on small items such as cylinder seals or other objects made from metal or precious stone. XPi, for example, comes from a small object made of lapis lazuli and reads simply 'Doorknob of precious stone, made in the house of Xerxes the king'; XH was inscribed on a silver pitcher and says that it was 'made in the house of Xerxes the king'. Obviously such items, which declare only their origin and ownership, are of little use in helping us to learn much of Xerxes himself, and so I shall concentrate on the longer inscriptions which have been found on buildings. The majority of these extended inscriptions have been found in the palace complex at Persepolis, and tend to refer primarily to Xerxes' building activities. They are written in the cuneiform script of Old Persian and, like Darius' works, are usually accompanied by translations into other languages – Elamite and Akkadian. One inscription, however, stands out in that it is

[12] DPd, DNb, DSj, DSk, DSs.

concerned not with building works but with the figure of the king himself. This was found near Persepolis in 1967 and is now denoted as XPl. A translation of the text reads as follows:

> A great god is Ahuramazda who created this excellent work which one sees; who created happiness for man; who bestowed wisdom and energy upon Xerxes the king. Says Xerxes the king: by the favour of Ahuramazda I am of such a kind that I am a friend to what is right, I am no friend to what is wrong.
>
> It is not my wish that to the weak is done wrong because of the mighty, it is not my wish that the weak is hurt because of the mighty, that the mighty is hurt because of the weak. What is right, that is my wish. I am no friend of the man who is a follower of the lie. I am not hot-tempered. When I feel anger rising, I keep that under control by my thinking power. I control firmly my impulses.
>
> The man who co-operates, him do I reward according to his co-operation. He who does harm, him I punish according to the damage. It is not my wish that a man does harm, it is certainly not my wish that a man if he causes damage be not punished. What a man says against a man, that does not convince me, until I have heard testimony (?) from both parties. What a man does or performs according to his powers, satisfies me, therewith I am satisfied and it gives me great pleasure and I am very satisfied and I give much to faithful men.
>
> I am trained with both hands and feet. As a horseman I am a good horseman. As a bowman I am a good bowman, both afoot and on horseback. As a spearman I am a good spearman, both afoot and on

> horseback. And the skills which Ahuramazda has bestowed upon me and I have had the strength to use them, by the favour of Ahuramazda, what has been done by me, I have done with these skills which Ahuramazda has bestowed upon me.[13]

Here we are presented with a portrait of a king who apparently perceives himself as favoured by the supreme god, Ahuramazda. He shows himself to be concerned to maintain this relationship by acknowledging the god's role both in his own fortunes and in the creation of the building upon which the inscription was carved, and also by denouncing anyone who follows the 'Lie', that is, who rejects Ahuramazda. Xerxes' self-image here is one of a just and upright ruler, who seeks fairness for his subjects, whether weak or strong. Furthermore, he gives us an insight, it seems, into his own perceptions of his personality – he is a man of self-control rather than rash impulse, yet at the same time he does not suffer gladly those who fail to display their loyalty to him as king. Finally, we are presented with a king who is trained in the arts of war – horsemanship, and the use of the bow and the spear.

It seems too good to be true; here we have what looks like a personal 'mission statement' of the king, a stone speaking to us in the very words of Xerxes himself, and giving us an insight, which has been denied to us by the Greek sources, into the mind of the ruler. Were this inscription to exist in isolation, we might well be content that we had at last found something to present the king's own point of view. This is not, however, the case. A mere superficial glance at the evidence reveals that this is no original manifesto designed to assert this

[13] The translation used here is that of Kuhrt 1995, p. 681.

king's individuality. Far from it; in fact, the inscription is an almost verbatim repetition of one created by Xerxes' father Darius, that which is now denoted as DNb, and which was found on Darius' tomb at Naqš-i Rustam. The name 'Darius' has been replaced by 'Xerxes', and little else has been altered.[14]

Rather than being evidence for an individual king's personality – or at least for the image of himself which he desired to project to the public – the inscription of Xerxes thus takes on new meaning as a statement emphasising continuity with the past, so much so that the words of that past have not even been adapted by the new king. By using the wording of his father's inscription, Xerxes was stressing the strength of his link with the Achaemenid dynasty, announcing to his readers that he was following on from his father's rule and demonstrating his allegiance to the traditions of the past. As Kuhrt (1995, p. 681) has noted, 'The fact that both kings had the same text inscribed *verbatim* shows that the sentiments expressed central and eternal tenets of Persian kingship – not the character traits of an individual monarch'. Xerxes, then, was laying claim to the characteristics which he was *expected* to possess, rather than giving an insight into his true personality.

The association of successor and predecessor seems to have begun to have been cultivated even during Darius' own reign, before the accession of Xerxes to the throne. Here the artistic evidence is helpful. A relief,[15] originally thought to be from Darius' palace at Persepolis, and later moved to the treasury there, depicts

[14] Gharib 1968 presents a comparison of the language of XPl and DNb; the differences are mainly grammatical and he suggests that both may have been copied from the same original draft (p. 55).
[15] See Root 1979, plate XVII (= Boardman 2000, fig. 4.13).

Darius, seated and surrounded by attendants. His crown prince stands behind him. The relationship of the two figures is indicated by the similarity of the garments they wear, their beards and crowns; the heir to the throne is facially almost an exact carbon copy of his father. This figure, standing behind the throne, can be identified as royalty also by the fact that he is, like Darius, raised slightly upon a pedestal and his relative height differentiates him from the other surrounding figures. This is an image also found elsewhere on the palace remains at Persepolis, notably on door jambs.[16] The heir to the throne was thus presented as personifying a continuation of his father's rule even before he took up his role as king. The point is even more noteworthy if we consider that there appears to have been some question over the inheritor of the Persian throne; one of Xerxes' inscriptions alludes to this by noting that Darius had other sons, but that he was chosen as the favourite.[17] Even when there may have been some debate as to the identity of the king's successor, this did not matter in terms of artistic representation. These images are not intended as realistic portraits depicting an individual's characteristics, but rather are stylised depictions of the ideal Persian king; in this sense they work in exactly the same way as the formulaic inscriptions. As Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1989, p. 558) has pointed out, the problems caused in trying to identify the various kings on the reliefs illustrates this point well: 'if individual kings are indeed portrayed, it is above all the unchanging traditional aspects of kingship that were emphasised and expressed'.

[16] For example Root 1979, plate XXVa, and Boardman 2000, fig. 4.16.
[17] XPf 27-35. Herodotus (7.2-3) also suggests that the issue of the succession was subject to dispute.

This emphasis on continuity with his father's reign manifests itself in a number of ways in several of Xerxes' other inscriptions. One very simple way in which the father-son link is stressed is for Xerxes to refer to himself explicitly as 'son of Darius', or to make mention of 'my father Darius'; this is a method which is adopted in the majority of the surviving inscriptions.[18] As mentioned earlier, one of the inscriptions, XPf, also makes specific mention of the succession question and thus stresses the king's familial links:

> Saith Xerxes the King: My father was Darius; Darius' father was Hystaspes by name; Hystaspes' father was Arsames by name. Both Hystaspes and Arsames were both living, at that time – thus unto Ahuramazda was the desire – Darius, who was my father, him he made king in this earth. When Darius became king, he built much excellent (construction).
>
> Saith Xerxes the King: Other sons of Darius there were, (but) – thus unto Ahuramazda was the desire – Darius my father made me the greatest after himself.
>
> When my father Darius went away from the throne, by the will of Ahuramazda I became king on my father's throne. When I became king, I built much excellent (construction). What had been built by my father, that I protected, and other building I added. What moreover I built, and what my father built, all that by the favour of Ahuramazda we built.[19]

By giving his genealogy here, Xerxes emphasises his connection with the past; he alludes also to the unusual nature of his father's accession to the throne by noting that both Darius' father and his grandfather were still alive when he

---

[18] See XPa 9-10, XPb 19, XPc 11, XPd 13, XPe 3, XPf 13-14, XPg 6, XPh 11, XPj 3, XPk 1, XSa 2, XSc 2, XE 19, XV 17.
[19] XPf 15-43.

became king. Xerxes stresses too that he was his own father's favourite for the succession and in this way underlines the legitimacy of his own position. Of course, he notes repeatedly, all of this was accomplished too with the approval and help of the Achaemenids' supreme god, Ahuramazda; in referring to this as well Xerxes reinforces his bonds with the dynasty. Briant (2002, p. 520) has also pointed out in relation to this inscription that, in contrast to the account of the succession given by Herodotus (7.2-3), Xerxes makes no mention here of the influence of his mother Atossa in determining the succession; he suggests that, had she exercised the sort of power claimed for her by the Greek historian, Xerxes could not have failed to note it here. Whether it is likely that an official Persian account would have mentioned such influence does seem questionable, but this nonetheless provides us with an example of one of the ways in which Greek sources have selected their material to give a negative slant on Xerxes' reign; in this case they often choose to build up a picture of the Persian king as subject to the manipulation of the women at his court.

Significantly in this inscription too, Xerxes refers to the building works undertaken by his father and by himself. Once more the stress is on continuity; this king is finishing what his father started. As many of Xerxes' other inscriptions have been found on his building works they are often similar to this one in noting that these architectural projects are an extension of those initiated by Darius. XPg 3-14, for example, from a plaque from a palace wall at Persepolis, explicitly states that 'By the favour of Ahuramazda, King Darius my father built and ordered (to be built) much good (construction). By the favour also of Ahuramazda I added to that construction and built further (buildings).'

Similarly, XPa 11-17 claims that the building of Persepolis was a project jointly carried out by Xerxes and his father: 'By the favour of Ahuramazda, this Colonnade of All Lands I built. Much other good (construction) was built within this (city) Persepolis, which I built and which my father built. Whatever good construction is seen, all that by the favour of Ahuramazda we built.' Once again we see what appears to be a conscious effort on Xerxes' part to align himself with the positive aspects of his father's reign and to place himself in the dynastic line; this king becomes an extension of Darius.

The archaeological evidence from Susa has shown that there too, as well as in Persepolis, Xerxes continued with his father's work; a recently-found inscription (XSd) confirms that he was responsible for the completion of the Darius gate there. The pattern is followed on the one inscription of Xerxes found outside Iran, at Lake Van in eastern Turkey, too: there, Xerxes declares: 'King Darius, who was my father – he by the favour of Ahuramazda built much good (construction), and this niche he gave orders to dig out, where he did not cause an inscription to be engraved. Afterwards, I gave order to engrave this inscription' (XV 16-27). Again, Xerxes shows that he has continued where his father left off. As Briant (2002, p. 254) has pointed out, references to buildings that are exclusively Xerxes' own are rare.

Just as Xerxes adopted and built upon the physical structures created during the reign of his father he also took the words inscribed upon those buildings and made use of them in his own inscriptions. The wholesale appropriation which we saw in XPl is the most extreme case, although elsewhere lengthy formulaic

chunks are extracted from the inscriptions of Darius for use in those of his son. Often Xerxes simply replaces the name of his father with his own name, using in particular the religious invocations of Ahuramazda, and the royal titles 'the Great King, King of Kings, King of countries containing all kinds of men, King in this great earth far and wide'. These formulae feature repeatedly in Xerxes' own inscriptions, so that a large proportion of each usually simply repeats the words of Darius.[20] These formulae are usually very similar in format to the opening words of Darius on the royal tomb at Naqš-i Rustam (DNa). The first fifteen lines of that inscription read as follows:

> A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, who made Darius king, one king of many, one lord of many.
>
> I am Darius the Great King, King of Kings, King of countries containing all kinds of men, King in this great earth far and wide, son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage.

Xerxes' inscriptions frequently appropriate this section of the inscription, simply adapting it to make it relevant to Xerxes himself rather than to Darius. By using the very words of his father, making the same links with Ahuramazda, and appropriating the same royal titles Xerxes was again able to create an impression of continuity, thus appearing to give further legitimacy to his own power.

If the traditions of the Achaemenid dynasty were to some extent invented by Darius, then, it appears that his son took upon himself the initial responsibility of maintaining them. In doing so he was only one of many Persian kings who

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[20] See, for example, XPa 1-11, XPb 1-21, XPc 1-9, XPd 1-14, Xpe, XPf 1-15, XPh 1-13, XV1-16.

followed on from Darius' lead. Later inscriptions of the successors of Xerxes demonstrate that they too went on to utilise the formulae established by Darius. An inscription of Artaxerxes I found at Persepolis (A^1Pa), for example, utilises the formulaic references to Ahuramazda and describes this king as 'son of Xerxes the king, grandson of Darius the king'. Whilst Darius was rare in that he created a new ideology for his dynasty it should be stressed that Xerxes was far from unique in simply taking this over for his own rule. Darius II, successor of Artaxerxes, went on to employ the same formulae; D^2Sb, for example, appropriates the list of royal titles used by this king's predecessors, as well as announcing that he built a palace by the favour of Ahuramazda and in continuation of the work of his own father. The practice of stressing such links with the past continues too in the extant inscriptions of Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III.

The evidence so far, then, appears to suggest Xerxes' intention to consolidate Darius' rule; with these inscriptions the Persian king proclaims his intent to live up to the standards set by his father and to maintain the stability of the Achaemenid royal rule. One inscription, however, has been seen in the past as offering a possible exception to these ideological resemblances between Xerxes and Darius. The so-called *daiva*-inscription from Persepolis (XPh) features the only country-list found in anywhere in Xerxes' inscriptions, and refers to a revolt among one of these countries. Ahuramazda, says Xerxes, helped him to restore order in that country. He then speaks of a place where *daiva*, false gods, or demons, were being worshipped; he, however, put a stop to this by destroying the sanctuary of the false gods and instituting the worship of Ahuramazda and Arta

(the true – that is, Persian – way). All of this was, of course, accomplished as a result of the favour of Ahuramazda. As this is a crucial text in the debate on the character of Xerxes, it is worth quoting in full:

> A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, made Xerxes king, one king of many, one lord of many. I am Xerxes the Great King, King of Kings, King of countries containing all kinds of men, King in this great earth far and wide, son of King Darius, an Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage.
>
> Saith Xerxes the King: By the favour of Ahuramazda these are the countries of which I was king, these are the countries which I seized outside of Persia; I ruled over them; they bore tribute to me; what was said to them by me, that they did; my law – that held them firm; Media, Elam, Arachosia, Armenia, Drangiana, Parthia, Aria, Bactria, Sogdiana, Chorasmia, Babylonia, Assyria, Sattagydia, Sardis, Egypt, Ionians, those who dwell by the sea and those who dwell across the sea, men of Maka, Arabia, Gandara, Sind, Cappadocia, Dahae, Amyrgian Scythians, Pointed-Cap Scythians, Skudra, men of Akaufaka, Libyans, Carians, Ethiopians.
>
> Saith Xerxes the King: When that I became king, there is among these countries which are inscribed above (one which) was in commotion. Afterward Ahuramazda bore me aid; by the favour of Ahuramazda I smote that country and put it down in its place.
>
> And among these countries there was (a place) where previously false gods were worshipped. Afterwards, by the favour of Ahuramazda, I destroyed that sanctuary of the demons, and I made a proclamation, "The demons

shall not be worshipped!" Where previously the demons were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahuramazda and Arta reverent(ly).

And there was other (business) that had been done ill; that I made good. That which I did, all I did by the favour of Ahuramazda. Ahuramazda bore me aid, until I completed the work.

Thou who (shalt be) hereafter, if thou shalt think, "Happy may I be when living, and when dead may I be blessed, "have respect for that law which Ahuramazda has established; worship Ahuramazda and Arta reverent(ly).

The man who has respect for that law which Ahuramazda has established, and worships Ahuramazda and Arta reverent(ly), he both becomes happy while living, and becomes blessed when dead.

Saith Xerxes the King: Me may Ahuramazda protect from harm, and my royal house, and this land: this I pray of Ahuramazda, this may Ahuramazda give to me!

This inscription has been used by historians as proof that Xerxes broke with his father's supposed policy of tolerance by becoming more despotic and persecuting followers of religions other than his own. To the list of his negative characteristics – weakness, immorality and cruelty – this inscription has been thought to add evidence of his bigotry. Once again preconceived ideas based on the hostile Greek sources are to blame for this reading of the inscription. The idea that Xerxes' behaviour was more extreme than that of his father can be traced back as far as Aeschylus' *Persae*, where the younger king is criticised for his youthful rashness and compared unfavourably to the dead Darius (see below, pp. 44-7).

Taken from the Persian viewpoint, however, the *daiva*-inscription suggests nothing which had not been precedented in Darius' reign. On a superficial level, this is another of the inscriptions which, in its opening lines, relies heavily upon the words of Darius (as written in DNa and quoted above, p. 18); here the closing lines of Xerxes' inscription too repeat those of his father's tomb inscription. Perhaps even more importantly, however, the country-list is very similar to that of DNa; Xerxes lists them in a slightly different order, and adds the men of Dahae and Akaufaka to Darius' list, but the idea of listing tribute-paying subjects is nothing new. There is also one subtle difference in the wording of the two inscriptions here; Xerxes' is less aggressive, in that he adds, 'These are the countries of which I was king', where his father's inscription had read only, 'these are the countries which I seized outside of Persia' (DNa 16-18). Here Xerxes' words actually stress continuity with his father's reign by implying that he inherited some of the countries over which he was king rather than seizing them by force.

The main point which has been adduced to demonstrate Xerxes' intolerance is the reference here to his suppression of rebellion. This in itself is again no radical new policy; the very context of Darius' Behistun inscription, as we saw earlier, was to report in particular the termination of various insurrections and to give specific details of these actions. As for Xerxes' supposed religious intolerance, again his behaviour seen here is no more extreme than that of his father. At one point in the Behistun inscription (DB 5.1-12) Darius describes the revolt and suppression of the Elamites; he then goes on to explain his actions by commenting that, 'The Elamites were faithless and by them Ahuramazda was not

worshipped. I worshipped Ahuramazda; by the favour of Ahuramazda, as was my desire, thus I did unto them.' The implication here is that one aspect of this rebellion was the failure to recognise the Persian religion; Darius, like his son, thus claimed to be the upholder of the laws of Ahuramazda, denouncing those who followed the Lie and were therefore the opponents of Arta.

Xerxes' *daiva*-inscription, then, appears to show this king as following on from where his father left off. Unlike the Behistun inscription, however, this gives no specific details which enable the historian to pinpoint the date and location of the events to which Xerxes refers. In view of this timelessness it cannot, therefore, be viewed as a straightforward historiographical document; rather it is to be seen as another ideological assertion of the issues which ought to concern an Achaemenid king. Briant (2002, p. 553) writes that this inscription of Xerxes is 'intended to illustrate the permanence of his power and the transcendence of his royal virtues'. In this case the points for concern are shown to be the maintenance of loyalty to himself and Ahuramazda by his subject peoples, and the upholding of Arta rather than the Lie. The ultimate message seems to be that rebellion from the Persian King equals a denial of the Persian god, Ahuramazda. Tradition has thus been re-stated once more.

Ultimately, then, if we are seeking from any of these inscriptions a continuous narrative of Xerxes' reign, we shall remain unsatisfied; likewise, we shall be disappointed if we want to gain an insight into the private thoughts and personality of the man behind the tyrannical image which has been portrayed by western sources since his invasion of Greece. It is clear that there is little here to

individualise the king; we might say that from many of the inscriptions he appears as a virtual carbon copy of his father, in much the same way in which the heir to the throne was depicted on Darius' reliefs. This conscious association of successor and predecessor consolidates the traditional aspects of Achaemenid rule, and, as we have noted, Xerxes was doing what his own successors would continue to do in generations to come; we might say that, in the case of Xerxes, this king at least took a positive decision to present himself as a carbon copy of his father, whilst his own heirs must have were simply following on from this tradition of inheritance which had been established for them. Whilst there emerges from the inscriptional evidence, however, a fascinating insight into the creation and maintenance of a Persian royal ideology, the question of who Xerxes was still remains; what we possess here is not the king's own personal voice but that of royal tradition. The Xerxes we find here is just as much of a construction as the Xerxes of western sources derived from the post-Persian Wars Greek traditions. The lack of inside evidence makes it unsurprising that even Iranologists have their perceptions informed by Greek historiographical prejudices. Consequently the 'real' Xerxes does not have even a remote chance of having his voice heard.

CHAPTER TWO

An Absent Presence: Aeschylus' Xerxes

Celebration and commemoration: the background

The repulse of Persian forces from Greece in 490 and 480-79 BC generated a whole series of cultural and artistic reactions which were to be the origins of traditions still alive today. Never before had the mainland Greeks been confronted with a barbarian invader who presented a direct threat to their lives and their homeland. The repulse of this force, after two separate invasions, provided the impetus for a process of memorialisation which was to have an impact upon art and literature well beyond the fifth century. The early stages of the conceptualisation of a divide between east and west can be seen in the 490s, with literary responses to the revolt of the Ionian Greeks from Persia drawing upon this perceived gap. The early Ionian geographer Hecataeus of Miletus had composed a *Periēgēsis* whose two books seem to have envisaged a cultural as well as a physical distance between the east and west – they bore the titles *Europe* and *Asia* – and he was said by Herodotus (5.36.2) to have advised the Ionians against revolt from Darius in the 490s, being aware of the vast resources which the Persian king had at his command. Dramatically, Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus*, thought by most scholars to have been produced in the late 490s,[1] had depicted Miletus as taken by the Persians (494 BC); Herodotus (6.21.2) records that the playwright was fined by the Athenians as punishment for the extreme

[1] The dating of the *Capture of Miletus* has been the subject of some controversy, with some suggesting a date as late as 480/79 BC. 493/2 BC (the year of Themistocles' archonship) seems to be a plausible date, although it cannot be proved. Rosenbloom 1993, pp. 170-1 summarises the main debate succinctly, with references.

emotional reaction which his play had produced in the audience. It was after the retreat of Xerxes' forces in 479 BC, however, with the celebration and commemoration of the victory over the Persians, that the idea of the Europe/Asia contrast began to crystallise in Greek thought; Hall (1989, p. 6) has commented that, 'Although a sense of shared ethnicity between all Hellenes existed in the archaic period, it was the Persian wars which engendered the polarization of Greek and barbarian.'

From this point on the Persian Wars became embedded in the Greek collective memory by way of a range of literary, artistic and ceremonial modes of expression which ensured that those of whose communal heritage these events were a part were never to be allowed to forget this great achievement. Along with the mythical precedents in which civilisation had triumphed over barbarism – the Trojan War, and the Amazonomachy, for example – this new episode in the recent history of Greece became assimilated into the corpus of chronicles of the glorious past.[2] It seems that the physical reminders of the barbarian invasion were ubiquitous; at Athens, for example, the ruined temples on the Acropolis remained as Xerxes had left them until the commencement of Pericles' building programme in the middle of the fifth century. It was later asserted that the Greeks had taken an oath declaring that they would not rebuild any temple which had been burnt or destroyed by the barbarians, but would leave them as a memorial to the sacrilege committed by the enemy. A fourth-century inscription details this oath.[3] Although the inscribed version does not include the clause concerning

[2] On the comparisons which were made between mythical and 'real' history at Athens in particular, see Castriota 1992, pp. 3-16.
[3] Tod 1948, no. 204 (pp. 303-7) = Rhodes and Osborne 2003, no. 88 (pp. 440-9).

rebuilding, the oath was also quoted by Lycurgus (*Against Leocrates* 80-81), and, much later, by Diodorus (11.29.2-3); their versions include the pledge not to rebuild the monuments. A large question mark hangs over the authenticity of the oath.[4] Regardless of whether or not any such pact had been made in the fifth century, however, the ultimate effect was the same; the presence of the ruined monuments until the mid-fifth century meant that Athenians were constantly reminded of the destruction caused by the Persian forces. Elsewhere, of course, spoils taken from the defeated Persians and dedicated in sanctuaries would have served too as a physical record of the wars.[5] Suggestions have been made that some of the more ostentatious objects might well have found their way into public usage. Broneer (1944) argues that the tent of Xerxes, taken after Plataea, was used as the *skene* for the theatre in Athens;[6] Allen (1941) suggested that the timbers from the Persian ships destroyed at Salamis were used to support the seats in the Athenian theatre; Thompson (1956, p. 286) has even suggested that the seat of Xerxes was kept in the Parthenon in antiquity.

Art created by the Greeks also began to demonstrate an interest in the new enemy from the east; several red-figure vases show Persian figures dressed in elaborately decorated clothing (as opposed to Greek warriors who appear as nude), with trousers, long sleeves and soft caps, and armed with bows and

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[4] Habicht 1961 demonstrates that the 'Plataea oath' was one of several such documents current in the fourth century and purporting to date from the Persian Wars period; he is sceptical about the authenticity of all of them. Rather, they appear to be part of a series of invented traditions concerning the fifth century. On the 'Plataea oath' see also Meiggs 1972, pp. 504-7.

[5] Thompson 1956, and Miller 1997, pp. 29-62 examine the evidence for the Persian spoils.

[6] See Robkin 1980 on the possibility that the Odeum of Pericles was based on Xerxes' tent (as claimed later by Plutarch – *Pericles* 13.9-11 – and Pausanias 1.20.4). Camp 2001, p. 101 suggests that the tent may have originally been used as the skene for the theatre, and later replicated in stone and timber for the Periclean Odeum; the archaeological remains of the Odeum suggest a similarity to the audience chambers of the Persian royal palaces at Susa and Persepolis. Miller 1997, pp. 235-6 is hightly sceptical of the link between the tent and the Odeum.

arrows.[7] Only one vase has been identified as perhaps relating to a specific character from the Persian invasion, however, and that is a fourth-century Apulian krater, known as the 'Darius vase'.[8] Here Darius is depicted in the centre (with his name inscribed), seated upon an elaborate throne, and surrounded by various other barbarian figures – a messenger, members of the royal council, a treasurer and Persian satraps. Beneath the messenger is inscribed the title ΠΕΡΣΑΙ. Above the king are the gods, with Hellas being led up to Zeus by Athena, and Asia being enticed by Apate ('Deception'). This has been thought to relate to a fourth-century play about the Persian invasion.[9] On a larger scale, the battle of Marathon was said to have been depicted in one of the paintings in Athens' Stoa Poikile, built around 460 BC,[10] and Castriota (1992, pp. 134-183) has illustrated how the building of the Parthenon, and the subjects of its sculptures (depicting mythical battles against Amazons, Centaurs and giants – all of which could be seen as legendary precedents for the Persian invasion), were inextricably linked with the Persian defeat. Built on the Acropolis too in the 450s BC was the statue of Athena Promachos ('fighter in front'), sculpted by Phidias; Gehrke (2001, p. 303) has commented how this statue 'provided a lasting reminder of the victory over the Persians'.

It is likely too that, as well as such material reminders of the Greeks' victory over Persia, there were also regular ceremonial commemorations of the wars;

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[7] See Boardman 1989 pp. 218-20, with figures 29 and 220. Amazonomachies on the vases also seem to be used as a parable for the Persian invasion (Boardman 1989 p. 227); for this parallel on monuments as well as vases, see also Castriota 1992, pp. 43-58.
[8] Trendall and Webster 1971 p. 112 with figure III.5,6, and Hall 1996, p. 8 with figure 1.
[9] Anti (1952) suggests that the vase may represent a fourth-century re-enactment of Phrynichus' *Persae*.
[10] See Wycherley 1953 pp. 27-9 and Castriota 1992 pp. 28-32.

certainly at the dramatic festivals of Athens we know that reminders of the wars were enacted on stage. The *Phoenissae* (*Phoenician Women*) of Phrynichus is an early example of this kind of dramatic recollection of the wars. The ancient Alexandrian hypothesis to Aeschylus' *Persae* gives us our greatest clues about this particular drama, suggesting that Aeschylus' play was modelled on the *Phoenissae* and quoting the opening line of Phrynichus' play: 'These belong to the Persians who have long ago departed.'[11] The hypothesis goes on to say that the defeat of Xerxes was reported by a eunuch who was setting out thrones for the magistrates of the empire at the beginning of the play; thus Phrynichus' work seems to have been one of the earliest demonstrations of the Greek fascination with what was perceived as Persian emasculation and effeminacy. Of the rest of the play's plot, however, nothing is known.[12]

Aside from drama, the poems ascribed to Simonides of Ceos also lend an insight into the early foundations of the Persian Wars tradition. Several of these works have survived; the shorter pieces attributed to him are epigrams composed in order to be carved on monuments, memorials and offerings erected in thanks for the victories or in remembrance of the fallen.[13] Here the concentration is, not unexpectedly, entirely upon the Greek side of the story with little detail which lends any insight into the Greek portrayal of the enemy; we find generic references to 'Medes' or 'Persians', to the Greek escape from slavery or the Persian superiority in numbers, but without any more specific characterisation of the Persian forces. The longer poems of Simonides include elegiac poems on the

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[11] *TGrF* 3 F 8.
[12] See Lloyd-Jones 1990, pp. 233-4.
[13] See Podlecki 1968, W. C. West 1970, and Barron 1990 on the Persian Wars epigrams.

battles of the Persian Wars – Salamis, Artemisium, and the recently-discovered Plataea poem[14] – as well as a poem for the Thermopylae dead.[15] These appear to have been commissioned by particular states and individuals and intended for performance in a specific places at specific events – this serves to confirm notions about the ritualistic commemoration of the Persian Wars. The emphasis is often upon the *kleos* and *aretē* of the Greek forces, and the sacrifices which they made to save Greece from slavery with little reference made to the identity of the Persians.[16] Other evidence concerning poetry from the fifth century suggests that the Sicilian poet Empedocles composed a *Crossing of Xerxes*, but that the work was burned by his sister.[17] Choerilus of Samos was also said to have composed an epic poem on the Persian Wars, which is variously cited as *The Victory of the Athenians over Xerxes*, *Perseis* or *Persica*; this began with an invocation of the Muse to tell how war came from Asia to Europe and contained an epic catalogue of Xerxes' forces.[18]

The range of evidence for Greek interest in Persia after the Persian Wars thus suggests that the barbarian enemy was viewed with a complex mixture of contempt, as a response to the violation of the homeland, and curiosity, resulting from this close contact with a foreign people. It might even be possible to

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[14] On the Plataea elegy, see Boedeker 1995, Rutherford 1996, pp. 174-88, Stehle 1996, and Aloni 1997.

[15] For the Simonides fragments see West 1992 (b), pp. 114-37. Boedeker and Sider's 2001 volume is a comprehensive collection of studies of these fragments.

[16] Pindar too made occasional reference to the Persian Wars in his athletic victory odes. See, for example, *Pythian* 1.75-77, *Isthmian* 5.48-49. At *Isthmian* 8.7-15 he expresses relief that the recent troubles (war against Persia, although this is not explicitly stated) are now over.

[17] Diogenes Laertius 8.57 quotes Aristotle as saying that Empedocles' style was 'Homeric', and that he used lots of metaphors and other poetic devices. He wrote various poems including a *Crossing of Xerxes*, which his sister burned deliberately because it was unfinished.

[18] On the evidence for, and fragments of, Choerilus' epic, see Huxley 1969. The chronology relating to Choerilus' life is confused but it seems certain that he was writing at some point in the fifth century.

suggest that Greek views of Persia stretched as far as envy, given the profusion of references which are made in literature to the untold riches and luxury of the Persian land.[19] Miller, in her 1997 study of Athenian cultural borrowing from Persia (referred to as 'Perserie'), comments (p. 1) that:

> The contradiction between anti-Persian rhetoric and Persising reality is ideological. Even while diffusing the threat of Achaemenid power and enhancing their own self-definition by portraying *barbaroi* as weak, emotional, and incapable of rational thought, the Athenians appropriated and reshaped aspects of Achaemenid culture to their own social and imperial needs.

This paradoxical combination of responses to Persia can perhaps be likened to British views on the French in the eighteenth century; as a result of a series of wars at this time, Catholic France became the other against which Protestant Britain was defined, and was a focus for hatred but also a source of envy (and emulation) resulting from its luxurious exports and cultural reputation.[20]

Within this context of celebration and commemoration, hatred and curiosity, the long-standing traditions concerning the wars with Persia developed in Greece. Part of this was necessarily the image of the Persian king who, in person, had brought the second expedition from the east to Greece. This invasion was, as we have seen, crucial in informing Greek perceptions of Persia from the fifth century on. Whilst none of the sources discussed above make any direct reference to Xerxes himself they are nonetheless important for our purposes in setting the

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[19] Tuplin 1996, p. 175 notes, for example, that the Athenians produced and used imitations of Persian luxury goods such as gold and silver tableware.
[20] See Colley 2003, p. 18 and pp. 87-91.

scene against which the Xerxes-tradition developed. The first extant source which does give us an insight into this particular strand of the Persian Wars theme is Aeschylus' tragic *Persae*, where the Persian king is actually seen on stage.

Aeschylus and Xerxes

As one of the earliest extant examples of the phenomenon of Orientalism – seen as the ideological construction of the Orient by the West – Aeschylus' *Persae* was described by Said as 'a highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient' (1978, p. 21; cf. pp. 56-7). More specifically, the text is 'the earliest testimony to the absolute polarization in Greek thought of Hellene and barbarian'.[21] Although the play presents the defeat of Persia as though from a Persian point of view – with the action taking place entirely within the Persian court and all of the characters as Persians – it was of course written by an Athenian (and, at that, one said to have fought the Persians at Marathon and whose brother was actually killed there)[22] for an Athenian audience, and was produced in 472 BC, only eight years after the defeat at Salamis with which the play is concerned. The Persian characters are therefore viewed through the eyes of the Greek victor, and so the *Persae* presents to us not

[21] Hall 1989, p. 57.
[22] For the evidence concerning Aeschylus' epitaph, which states that he fought at Marathon, see Sommerstein 1995; Herodotus 6.114 provides details of one Cynegeirus, son of Euphorion (and therefore the brother of Aeschylus), who died having had his hand chopped off with an axe when getting hold of the stern of a Persian ship after Marathon.

a truthful account of how real Persians actually behaved, but lends instead an insight into the way in which the Athenians perceived their barbarian enemy.

Within this framework, the figure of Xerxes provides the focus for much of the play's discourse with the east, displaying many of the characteristics which were soon to become familiar stereotypical aspects of the barbarian invader – here we find both the fearsome, cruel tyrant, and the effeminate, ineffectual weakling embodied in one character. These two character-types might seem wholly incompatible, and yet all subsequent portrayals of Xerxes draw in varying degrees upon this combination of the risible and the terrifying. Here was an enemy capable of inspiring terror and awe, who had threatened the homeland and the lives of the Greeks at large; by articulating the absolute fear felt at his advance, the ultimate victors were able to express their pride in their own success at overcoming the Persian against all the odds, yet at the same time Xerxes' defeat – precisely because it had seemed at first that all was weighted in his favour – made him worthy too of their scorn and derision. This first appearance of Xerxes on the western stage therefore foreshadows much of the later dialogue concerning the Persian monarch. The *Persae* also presents us with an insight into many of the key topoi which were later to become standard symbols in the portrayals of the king found in western treatments of the Persian Wars tradition; these were images which would remain surprisingly stable, recurring for centuries and enduring even until the present day.

Xerxes as the formidable invader

> The raging leader of populous Asia
> drives his godlike flock against every land
> in two movements: an equal of the gods, born of the golden race,
> he trusts in his stalwart
> and stubborn commanders both on land and on the sea.
>
> He casts from his eyes the dark
> glance of a lethal snake;
> with numerous soldiers and numerous sailors
> he speeds on in his Syrian chariot,
> leading an Ares armed with the bow against famous spearsmen.
>
> No-one is so renowned for valour
> that they can withstand such a huge flood of men,
> and ward them off with sturdy defences.
>
> (*Persae* 74-89)[23]

Thus is Xerxes first introduced to us in the parodos. The Chorus of Persian elders, here expressing their concern for the welfare of the massive Persian army which has gone to Greece with their leader, articulate too the way in which many Greeks must surely have perceived the advancing Persian king with his vast force. Here the emphasis is primarily upon the numbers of the Persian troops, and the awe and terror which these must have inspired. This extract is

[23] All translations of the *Persae* used here are those of Hall 1996.

characteristic of the tone of the entire parodos in which the Chorus give a roll-call of the Persian force and its commanders which reads not unlike an epic catalogue of troops (21-55). Repeatedly the Chorus highlight the fact that the *whole* of Asia has gone to Greece (11, 56-7, 61), and the frequent use of words beginning with πολυ- (πολύχρυσος, 'rich in gold', at 3, 9, and 53; πολύανδρος, 'populous', at 74; πολύχειρ καὶ πολυναύτας, 'with numerous soldiers and numerous sailors', at 83) stresses the manifold nature of the army and the excesses of the king. Later the Chorus, in a Homeric-style simile to convey a sense of the numbers of the force, say that 'all the cavalry and all the infantry, like a swarm of bees, have left with the leader of the army' (128-9).[24] It is in such descriptions that we see a snapshot of the inception of what were later to become well-worn clichés concerning the numbers of the Persian forces and the opulence of the march to Hellas. In the immediate instance this emphasis on Persian numbers expresses the terrifying nature of the invasion from a Greek point of view; the Persian Chorus believe, as many Greeks must have believed, that the Persian force was irresistible and that it would be impossible for anyone to withstand such an onslaught. It also reminds us, of course, that the scale of any disaster which befalls the Persian force must necessarily be huge and total.

The picture of Xerxes which is imagined here is necessarily a terrifying one; he is visualised as being a deadly snake, and the Chorus go on to refer to the 'Ares armed with the bow' (that is, his army) which he leads against the Greeks. This reference to the indiscriminate and bloodthirsty god of war[25] conveys some sense

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[24] Cf. *Iliad* 2.87-90, where the assembly of Achaeans is described as being like a swarm of bees.
[25] Hall 1996, *ad* 73 notes also that it is Ares in the *Iliad* who is described as θοῦρος, just as Xerxes is said to be θούριος here.

of the havoc which the Persian king intended to wreak upon his enemy by stirring up the kind of violence associated with Ares. It is significant here too that Aeschylus sets up the opposition between Europe and Asia in terms of the weapons used by each. Whilst Xerxes' army carry bows, the fighters from Greece bear spears; the bow and arrow were to become symbolic of Persia and are alluded to as such on frequent occasions throughout the play.[26] The dichotomy implies that masculine warriors fight as hoplites, whilst their enemies, fighting with bow and arrow like the Amazon women of Greek myth, are effeminized and inferior.

As well as this sense of the enormity of his army, one other key image relating to Xerxes is introduced in the parodos of the *Persae*. At lines 65-71, the Chorus sing: 'The King's army, which annihilates cities, has already passed over to our neighbour's land opposite, crossing the strait named after Helle, Athamas' daughter, on a floating bridge bound with flaxen ropes, yoking the neck of the sea with a roadway bolted together (πολύγομφον ὅδισμα ζυγὸν ἀμφιβαλὼν αὐχένι πόντου)'. This is the play's first use of an image which recurs later with reference to the Hellespont crossing; at 130-1, the Chorus again describe the army as having 'crossed to the other continent after yoking the sea between the two headlands (τὸν ἀμφίζευκτον ἐξαμείψας ἀμφοτέρας ἅλιον / πρῶνα κοινὸν αἴας)'. The same metaphor is later used twice by the queen (722, 736). The bridging, or yoking, of the Hellespont was to become another of the standard topoi relating to Xerxes' invasion of Greece, acting as a paradigm of the hybris of the king. References to the crossing from Asia turned the actual physical event

[26] Cf. 26, 30, 55, 147-9, 239-40, 278, 555-6, 926, 1020-3.

into something with a deeper symbolic meaning; it came to represent Xerxes' despotic cruelty as well as his mission to enslave the Greeks in order to incorporate them into his already vast slave empire.

The image of the sea as having a yoke (ζυγόν) placed about its neck metaphorically implies that it is a living being, to be tamed, just as Xerxes attempted to subdue Greece with the yoke of slavery; often in literary treatments of the crossing the sea is described as having been treated in various ways as a slave by the king.[27] The noun τὸ ζεῦγος had been used since Homeric times to refer to a pair of beasts joined or yoked together (for example, *Iliad* 18.543), or to the vehicle driven by these beasts (see LSJ s.v. ζεῦγος); this unquestioningly involves the subjection of the animals involved. The verb ζεύγνυμι also applied to yoking or harnessing, although it appears also in other contexts where joining or fastening take place, and not necessarily always involving slavery; at *Iliad* 18.276, for example, city doors are said to be ἐζευγμέναι.[28] The verb can also be used to refer to marriage; in such a context, like the English term 'wedlock', it suggests a binding action. The earliest example given by LSJ to refer to the joining of opposite banks with bridges is the Aeschylean usage; frequently in Greek literature from this point on the term is applied to Xerxes' bridge which might be taken to imply that the Persian invasion suggested this particular application of the term. When we combine it with other terminology relating to slavery in the *Persae* (and later literature describing the crossing) the notion that Xerxes was seen to be attempting to enslave the elements as well as the people of

[27] The most obvious of these is Herodotus' description (7.35) of Xerxes as having had the Hellespont whipped, and a pair of fetters thrown into it after a storm broke up the first bridge which had been constructed. Timotheus also uses the image at *Persae* 72-81.
[28] For further examples, see LSJ s.v. ζεύγνυμι.

Greece becomes even stronger. Later in the *Persae*, for example, Darius describes Xerxes as having used fetters (δεσμώμασιν, 745) and hammered shackles (πέδαις σφυρηλάτοις, 747) to constrain the sea, and, in doing so, having tried to overcome the will of the gods.

The desire to enslave what nature intended to be free is of course a crucial part of the dialogue concerning the Persian Wars and the hybris of Xerxes from the fifth century on; in the *Persae* the connection between the Hellespontine crossing and the intention of Xerxes to enslave the people of Greece is clear; the same images are used of both actions. For example, the Chorus sing (49-50) that 'the dwellers of sacred Tmolus are set on casting the yoke of slavery (ζυγὸν ἀμφιβαλεῖν δούλιον) onto Greece'.[29] Perhaps the most striking image of such subjugation in the play, however, comes in the queen's account of her dream (179-99). She relates that she saw two women, one in Persian clothes, and one in Doric garments; these may represent either Asia and Hellas respectively, or the Asiatic and mainland Greeks. The two quarrelled, and Xerxes 'tried to restrain and mollify them. He harnessed them both beneath his chariot and put a yoke-strap beneath their necks (ἅρμασιν δ' ὕπο / ζεύγνυσιν αὐτὼ καὶ λέπαδν' ὑπ' αὐχένων / τίθησι)' (190-2).

With the use of such images, Xerxes is thus seen as a straightforwardly terrifying figure, intent on enslaving the Greeks whose homeland he had invaded with the vast army and naval force at his command. This frightening encounter was of

[29] Later, too, the Persians themselves are described as being 'yoked' under Xerxes' regime; the Chorus imagine that they may be able to speak freely once this yoke has been removed (591-4).

course all part of the Athenians' experience of the war with the Persians, and the portrayal of the Persian king as the formidable invader in this way might seem to be an uncomplicated way for Aeschylus to tap into his audience's emotions. The situation is more complex than that, however; in spite of the seeming presentation of Xerxes as a larger than life tyrant, formidable in his power, Aeschylus at the same time succeeds in sidelining the king from the action of his play, and implicitly from the action of the Persian Wars.

An absent presence

Although Xerxes' name is first mentioned in the fifth line of the *Persae*, he does not actually appear on stage until line 908, well over three-quarters of the way through the play's 1078 lines. His eventual appearance in itself introduced a paradox for the ancient Athenian audience; the king's *presence* on stage, before their eyes, marked the end of his journey back to the Persian court and thus represented for them his *absence* from Greece, as the culmination of the Greek victory at Salamis. Tied in with this, we also see the emergence here of a 'discourse of negativity' through which the king himself is presented as emphatically lacking in substance.

With the opening lines of the play, Xerxes is already conspicuous by his absence; the first mention of his name is in the context of his departure from Persia to Greece. The Chorus open with the following lines (1-7):

> We are called "the Faithful" of the Persians
> who have gone to the land of Greece,

and we are guardians of the sumptuous palace, rich in gold.
Lord Xerxes the King himself,
son of Darius,
chose us by virtue of our seniority to oversee his domain.

Xerxes is thus among those who have gone (τῶν οἰχομένων, 1), and attention is drawn to the fact that these elders have been appointed in his stead to oversee matters whilst he is away.[30] Immediately we are aware of this void at the Persian court; in a sense the next nine hundred lines anticipate Xerxes' eventual arrival on stage. This prolonged delay allows time for us to be introduced to the king from a distance; he may be physically far away, but his name and his actions are on the lips of the play's characters throughout.[31] We might be led to believe, then, that Xerxes, although offstage, is largely at the forefront. The situation is not so simple, however. Further examination of the way in which Xerxes is depicted will reveal only a faceless shadowy figure, whose literal absence is mirrored by the text's constant failure to conceive a tangible idea of his actual characteristics.

Xerxes is frequently defined by his material surroundings. The parodos, as discussed earlier, concentrates more upon the army and its roll call of commanders than specifically upon the man at its head. The effect of the mass of troops, detailed in forty lines (16-55) before any kind of description of the king

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[30] It seems likely that Phrynichus' *Phoenissae* too began with such an emphasis upon the absence of the Persian king from the court; as the hypothesis to Aeschylus' *Persae* records, the *Phoenissae* opened with the line which stresses absence rather than presence: 'These belong to the Persians who have long ago departed' (τάδ' ἐστὶ Περσῶν τῶν πάλαι βεβηκότων).

[31] Xerxes' name is mentioned a total of sixteen times before his arrival on stage: six times by the Chorus (5,144, 156, 550, 551, 552), four times by the queen (199, 718, 734, 754), four times by the messenger (299, 341, 356, 465) and twice by Darius (782, 832).

himself, appears to dwarf Xerxes. It also stresses the fact that Xerxes, whilst being absent himself, is responsible also for creating further absence by emptying out Asia of her men (59-60): 'Such is the flower of manhood, such is the flower of the Persian land which has gone (οἴχεται)'.[32] The first description of Xerxes himself does not come until lines 74-85 (cited above, p. 34) Here, again, the king is described largely in terms of his surroundings and resources rather than his own personal characteristics. The impression created is again one of distance. By being described as 'driving his godlike flock' here (ποιμανόριον θεῖον ἐλαύνει, 75), the king is envisaged as standing behind his troops, preceded by them in the invasion rather than at the forefront; this does not sit well with the aggressive image of him as θούριος, 'raging' (74), presenting instead a picture of apparent cowardice. Similarly, the verb διώκων, used at line 84, conveys a sense of 'following', or 'driving on', rather than leadership from the front.

Thus shielded by his vast army, Xerxes, with his many soldiers and many sailors, is cast in the shade of the resources of his empire, 'trusting in his stubborn and stalwart commanders' (79-80), rather than taking positive action himself. The description of the position of the king in relation to his troops may well have been based upon actual observation by the Greeks of the way in which the Persians fought, yet the fact that Aeschylus chose to single this out in his description surely demonstrates that importance was ascribed to this feature, which illustrates the difference between the distant Persian king and the Greek leaders who were usually to be found in the thick of the fight. The chariot in which Xerxes rides (84) acts symbolically to reaffirm the distancing of the king

[32] For the theme of the 'emptying out' of Asia, see Harrison 2000, pp. 66-75.

from the action; like his array of troops, it shields him from the fray, as well as literally removing him from the immediate action. Of course, Xerxes' chariot would not be the only such vehicle in the Persian entourage (the Chorus mention the 'numerous chariots' of the troops at line 46, for example), but the fact that the king's ἅρμα is singled out for mention here is again significant in terms of his perceived role within the army.[33] The overall impression created is one of Xerxes as onlooker rather than active participant.

Shadows of a king

The distancing of Xerxes is reiterated further with the appearance of the queen on stage. Her account of her dream (179-99) appears to endorse the suggestion that the king is a man of little substance. Significantly, the description of the dream is the only place in the play where we are presented with an image of Xerxes as taking positive action on his own account rather than either looking on or simply giving the orders for action to be taken. As noted earlier, the dream, in which Xerxes yokes together two women representing either Asia and Hellas, or Asiatic and mainland Greece, mirrors both Xerxes' actions in trying to conquer Greece and his bridging of the Hellespont. Ultimately, however, he is thwarted in his attempt to join the two continents; one of the women struggles beneath the yoke and throws him from his chariot. We are told quite simply by the queen, 'My son fell out' (πίπτει δ' ἐμὸς παῖς, 197). By being toppled from the chariot which marked him out earlier, Xerxes is reduced to nothing as he is symbolically

[33] Hall 1996, *ad* 84, also comments on the opportunity in performance for a contrast between the splendid mode of transport mentioned here and the shabby 'curtained car' on which Xerxes later seems to appear at 1000-1.

stripped of one of the material assets used to define him. In the dream as well as in reality and in the world of the play Xerxes' attempt at control is thwarted and he is reduced to a state of passivity and helplessness; his father, in the queen's vision, can only stand and watch whilst his son tears his robes in grief (198-200). The introduction of Xerxes as only a dream figure rather than as a real character on stage reaffirms his intangible state in the play. He is not yet literally brought before the eyes of the audience (either the Chorus, who are the play's internal audience, or the actual spectators of the drama), as the queen stresses(211-12): 'These things are terrifying for me to *see*, and for you to *hear* (ταῦτ' ἔμοιγε δείματ' ἔστ' ἰδεῖν, / ὑμῖν δ' ἀκούειν)'. We have yet to see whether these shadows will prove to have any substance.

The appearance of Darius in the dream introduces a new motif in relation to the portrayal of Xerxes. The image of his dead father observing and pitying Xerxes in his stricken state mirrors the play's overall plot where Darius does indeed appear on stage to comment on his son's actions. Indeed, Darius, although dead, seems to us to be far more real than Xerxes himself for much of the play; this has crucial implications for our perception of Xerxes as more of an absence than a presence. From the very beginning we have been reminded of Darius as Xerxes' forebear; in line 6, the present king is referred to as Δαρειογενής, 'son of Darius'. The appearance of Darius in the Queen's dream foreshadows the actual arrival of Darius' ghost on stage at line 681. Darius, although actually dead, spends more time before the eyes of the audience than his son who is still living; he speaks a total of one hundred and twenty-five lines whilst Xerxes, when he appears, is given only sixty-eight lines, and sings these in the form of ritual lament rather

than speaking as his father does.[34] Not only is Darius given the opportunity to pass judgement on the actions of his son but he also performs the crucial function of prophesying what will happen next – the Persian destruction at Plataea.

The effect of bringing Darius to the forefront has powerful implications in terms of the way in which it affects our view of Xerxes. Repeatedly throughout the play the present king is presented merely as an inadequate shadow of his father. This contrast of the two kings is made both by the Chorus and by Darius himself. It first appears in the ode of lamentation sung by the Chorus immediately after the news has arrived of the destruction of the Persian army (548-57):

> For now the entire land of Asia mourns
> emptied out of its men.
> Xerxes led them away (*popoi*),
> Xerxes destroyed them (*totoi*),
> Xerxes wrong-headedly drove everything on in seafaring ships.
>
> Why was Darius, lord of the bow,
> beloved leader of Susa,
> so benign in the past to his citizens?

The emphasis on Xerxes as an agent of destruction here could not be more powerful with the repetition of his name at the beginning of three lines. By contrast, we are reminded that Darius caused no harm to his people. Xerxes thus becomes the negative image of his father, representing only what his father was not. This is re-emphasised again in the Chorus' necromantic hymn which

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[34] See below, p. 57, for discussion of the significance of Xerxes as singing rather than speaking.

summons Darius' ghost (634-80). Here they stress their love and respect for their former king (652-5):

> For he never killed our men
> through the ruinous waste of war.
> He was called godlike in counsel for the Persians, and godlike in
> counsel
> he was, since he steered the army well.

By implication, then, Xerxes' actions are the precise opposite of those of his father by whose standards he is to be judged.

With the appearance of the ghost of Darius himself the contrast is taken still further. In the first place the dead king's presence on stage serves to stress the absence of his son from the scene; he, although a ghost, is more real to the audience than Xerxes who has yet to appear. Bardel (1999, p. 101) comments that the raising of Darius' ghost is 'part of a nexus of violations of the natural order committed by the Persians and their leader Xerxes' and later discusses the interplay of presence and absence which is stressed by the appearance of the ghost: 'Darius' current *presence* is not only in contrast to his former *absence*: his temporary appearance also heightens the irreversible loss of the flower of the Persian youth' (p. 113). I would argue too that the appearance of Darius also makes the absent Xerxes seem still more distant and insubstantial; this shade has more substance than the still living Persian king.

At the same time the ghost of Darius acts as a physical reminder of all which Xerxes is not. The dramatic portrayal of Xerxes as antithetical to his father

necessitates some subtle manipulation of history, however. At lines 744-51, for example, Darius expresses his disbelief that his son, in his 'youthful audacity' (νέῳ θράσει, 744), should have attempted to alter nature itself by attempting to enslave the Hellespont with his bridge. First, this emphasis on Xerxes' youth, seen also at line 13, and used to contrast with the wise old Darius, overlooks the fact that Xerxes was around forty years old at Salamis! For the contrast with Darius' own actions to work here, we are also required to forget that he too attempted something similar to his son's project. Herodotus refers to Darius' own joining of Asia and Europe by bridging the Bosphorus (4.87-8, cf. 3.134.4). Aeschylus' Chorus, however, later omit any mention of this crossing by Darius in their ode in praise of his military achievements (852-907).[35] Darius also expresses concern that the wealth which he himself amassed will be destroyed by his son and the queen responds by saying that her son was urged on in his folly by wicked men who persuaded him to try to extend his father's empire (753-8). Of course this only serves to undermine Xerxes further, as he is presented as being manipulated by the ambitions of others rather than taking independent action on his own account.[36]

Ultimately Darius makes the contrast of father and son explicit by commenting that never before has such a disaster befallen the city of Susa (759-61); he goes on to boast, 'I went on many military campaigns with a large army, but I never brought such a great catastrophe on the city' (780-1). Xerxes is thus seen to be a

[35] In contrast with the slant given to events by Aeschylus, Herodotus tends to emphasise a degree of continuity between Darius and Xerxes. The effect there is also to undermine Xerxes, although in a way which obviously differs from Aeschylus' presentation of Xerxes as the antithesis of his father. The effect in Herodotus' narrative of stressing the continuity between the two kings is to trivialise Xerxes by showing him as failing to have any ideas of his own. See below pp. 90-4.
[36] Cf. Herodotus 7.5-6 on Mardonius' influence in persuading Xerxes to invade Greece.

personal failure, implicitly lacking the qualities that his father possessed. His youth, ambition and folly make him the inverse of Darius and contribute to his ultimate defeat. Once again, for this to have its desired impact, we must conveniently forget that Darius too, although not present in person, organised an invasion of Greece which was thwarted at Marathon; he had also suffered a great personal military humiliation when, having invaded the Scythians' territory, he was outwitted by them and forced to retreat. The negative comparison between father and son, however artificially imposed, serves nonetheless to sideline Xerxes still further; rather than being given a definition in his own right, he becomes the antithesis of his father's positive characteristics and is thus presented as no more than a mere inadequate shadow of Darius.[37] The Chorus' lavish eulogy of Darius' rule after the departure of his ghost (852-907) ratifies this impression. This begins with the somewhat excessive exclamation (852-6), '*O popoi*, what a great and excellent life of civic order was ours, when the old all-sufficing undamaging invincible godlike King Darius ruled the land!' and goes on to praise the dead king's military exploits and to list the lands over which he ruled.[38]

Here we gain an insight into the beginnings of the process by which Xerxes was to become the archetypal wicked barbarian king, as contrasted with his predecessors. Wiesehöfer (2001, pp. 42-55) has examined this phenomenon,

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[37] As Easterling 1984, pp. 37-8 has pointed out, the contrast which is made between Xerxes and Darius complicates the straightforward Greek/Persian dichotomy, and thus, partly by way of the contrast with his father which is evoked, 'Xerxes becomes an example of humanity over-reaching itself, not just of an essentially Persian mode of behaviour' (p. 38).

[38] Hall 1996, *ad* 852-907 notes that many of the states in the list were Greek communities which were once under Persian control, but had been liberated by the time of the play's production in 472 BC; she comments here that 'The play's ostensible lament for the Persians' lost domains functions for the audience as a celebration of the regained autonomy of numerous Greek city-states.'

contrasting Xerxes with Cyrus, who has been received since antiquity as a shining example of the good Persian king. He shows that the sharp contrast made between Cyrus and Xerxes is not justified, and that the evidence which remains in fact shows that their methods of safeguarding their reign were not vastly different. Similarly in the *Persae* the contrast between Xerxes and Darius seems largely artificial, as shown in Chapter One above, where inscriptions from the reigns of the two kings appeared to demonstrate continuity. The demonisation of Xerxes no doubt stemmed largely from the fact that his was the last Persian campaign to blight Greek soil. Our sources from the crucial period in which the traditions were first shaped are also profoundly Athenocentric, and inevitably his sacking of Athens would have been a key factor contributing to the image of him which lasted in the Greek imagination.

The fact that Xerxes personally was repulsed by the Greeks (as was not the case in the invasion of Darius, who did not himself participate) perhaps engendered a particularly extreme form of 'othering' in which Xerxes became the embodiment of everything to which the Greeks were opposed; his 'invention' in the Greek imagination took place too at the point when the notion of 'being Greek' was also invented, and in Xerxes was an ideal polar opposite for this notion of ethnicity. The creation of this hate-figure could well have resulted in part too from the lack of such a character in the Greek cultural encyclopaedia at this time; Cyrus' son Cambyses had come to be viewed as an example of impious despotism, as

contrasted with his father's benevolence.[39] This, however, was the first time that the Greeks had quite literally been confronted with a real-life model of such outrageous behaviour.

Xerxes the onlooker

Xerxes is sidelined even in descriptions of key events thought to have been his doing. Just as the chariot acts as a symbol of his detachment from the infantry, so, in the course of the descriptions of events in Greece, Xerxes continues to be an onlooker rather than a participant. Paradoxically, no doubt many members of the ancient audience, although now in the role of spectators, would have been more closely involved in the action at Salamis and Plataea than the Xerxes who is presented to them here. We might contrast here the actions of the Athenian commanders who actively participated in the battles of the Persian Wars; Miltiades at Marathon and Themistocles at Salamis. Again, the literary removal of Xerxes from the action may be based on real Greek experience of how Persian leaders behaved in conflict, yet Aeschylus' constant stress on the absence of Xerxes suggests a desire, whether conscious or unconscious, to sideline the Persian king wherever possible.

We first become aware of the removal of Xerxes from the thick of the conflict when the messenger relates his version of events at Salamis. On being asked by

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[39] At *Persae* 765-86, Darius lists the Persian kings from Medos on, and gives comments on whether each was good or bad. Here Cambyses' characteristics are not mentioned, although Mardos, who followed him, is said to have been 'a disgrace to his fatherland and the ancient throne'. It is in Herodotus' work (3.14, 3.16, 3.27-38) that we are first given an account of Cambyses' insane crimes. For a summary of Herodotus' portrayals of Cyrus and Cambyses, see Waters 1971, pp. 49-56.

the queen who survived the disaster and who perished the Messenger replies (299), 'Xerxes himself lives and looks upon the light.' The very fact of the king's survival here sets him apart from the masses and the action of the battle; this becomes clear when the Messenger goes on to relate a catalogue of all those who died (302-30). By still existing the king is, by implication, guilty of failing to take part in the battle. His role in what follows compounds this guilt. The messenger narrates the story of Salamis to his audience and Xerxes' role in this is clearly that of spectator rather than actor. First, he proves himself to be utterly stupid by falling for Themistocles' bogus claim that the Greeks are planning to flee. This appears to foreshadow later treatments of the Salamis story in which Themistocles acts as a foil to Xerxes, pointing up the Persian king's failings as a military leader by displaying his own tactical brilliance. Xerxes' inadequacy as a military tactician is a recurring motif in depictions of his invasion; he lacks the cunning intelligence thought to be inherent in the Greek character.[40]

Acting on the false information Xerxes issues orders to his men in a speech which, significantly, is related by the messenger in *oratio obliqua* (361-71):

> Because Xerxes did not understand that this Greek was tricking him, nor that the gods were against him, on hearing this he immediately gave a pre-battle speech to his admirals as follows. As soon as the sun should cease burning the earth with its rays and darkness should take over the regions of the sky, they were to arrange the column of ships in three rows to guard the passageways leading out to the sounding sea, and other ships were to surround and encircle Ajax's island. If the Greeks

[40] On Themistocles as an example of cunning intelligence in Greek thought (likened to Odysseus), see Detienne and Vernant 1978, pp. 313-14. See also below, pp. 81-3.

> avoided a horrible fate, and found some way of escaping secretly with their ships, the prescribed punishment for all his men would be beheading.

The lack of direct speech here contrasts strongly with the encouraging battle exhortation of the Greeks, a call for the preservation of liberty which is related in direct speech, [41] thus giving an impression of greater immediacy and reality. Not only has Xerxes been outwitted by Themistocles, we learn here, but the gods are against him; in the light of his hybristic behaviour it is not difficult to understand why. Xerxes' threat to have the Persians universally beheaded if all does not go according to plan highlights his cruelty; this is another aspect of the stereotypical barbarian despot, inhumane and no respecter of the law or of the individual. It is clear from this point that the king intends to take no part in the actual battle: by distancing himself, in this way, he implicitly absolves himself of any responsibility for failure. Similarly, he later issues orders for an attack on the island of Psyttaleia (447-454), again as a passive bystander. This time we are given no indication at all of his actual words, directly or indirectly.

The literal distance of Xerxes from the action becomes clear shortly after we are told of his orders concerning Psyttaleia. On seeing the destruction of his men on that island as well as at sea, the messenger relates (465-70),

> Xerxes wailed aloud as he saw the depth of the disaster. For he had a seat with a clear view of the whole militia, a high bank close to the sea. He tore his robes and shrilly screamed, and straightaway gave an order to his infantry, rushing away in disorderly flight.

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[41] 402-5: 'O sons of the Greeks, come on, liberate your fatherland, liberate your children your wives, the shrines of your ancestral gods and the graves of your forefathers. Our struggle now is on behalf of them all!' Podlecki 1970, p. 62 suggests that these are an iambic rendering of Themistocles' actual words at Salamis.

The image of Xerxes sitting on his throne, observing the action of the battle, is another which was later to become firmly established as a standard topos of the Persian invasion, appearing in narratives of Thermopylae as well as of Salamis (see below, pp. 75-7, on the image of the throne in Herodotus' work).[42] Here we see its earliest extant use as a means of detaching the king from the scene of the battle and literally placing him on the sidelines; he is clearly presented only as observer rather than actual participant. Once again he does not speak but instead cries and screams out loud in reaction to the events before him; these actions combine with his ripping of his garments to produce the traditional gestures of lamentation usually associated in Athens with women only and therefore representative of Xerxes' supposed effeminacy as an eastern barbarian.[43] In spite of his grief, however, Xerxes is still able to shout orders to his men in an attempt to exert some control, although once more we are given no indication of his actual words. None of this, of course, has any effect on the outcome of the actual battle.

The distancing of Xerxes from the battle has implications for his moral position. To an ancient Athenian audience he would clearly appear as no hero, but a coward, in contrast with the Greeks who fought to uphold their freedom and their honour. This image of his cowardice is compounded when the Persian king determines to put as much distance as possible between himself and the Greek victors. The messenger relates the flight of the Persian fleet and infantry (480-

[42] Thompson 1956, pp. 287-90 offers some speculations as to the appearance of the seat of Xerxes.
[43] See below, pp. 57-60 for discussion of Xerxes' later lamentation when he actually appears on stage.

514), although with no specific reference to the king himself as yet. Xerxes' own cowardly departure is not made explicit until the appearance of Darius. The queen reiterates then that only Xerxes, with few men remaining, reached the Hellespontine bridge back to Asia (734-6). Later, however, Darius reminds us that his son has left selected troops behind in Greece (803-4). These were the men with Mardonius who were to be defeated at Plataea in the final battle of the Persian Wars, as prophesied by Darius at lines 816-17. This is a powerful reminder of the fact that Xerxes himself was well and truly absent by the time of the last battle; he was safely back in Asia. His departure from Greece and absence at Plataea thus provided a precedent in reality for the way in which the text succeeds in making him appear as marginal both to the play and to the real action of the Persian invasion.

From riches to rags

By the time Xerxes appears on stage, we have already relived in detail the actions surrounding the battle of Salamis without any physical sign of the king himself. This shadowy figure appears at last at line 908 and his entrance raises a number of particular issues concerning of the king's presentation. First of these is the question of in what mode he enters on to the stage. Most scholars have argued that the Chorus' reference to Xerxes' σκηναῖς / τροχηλάτοισιν ('curtained car', 'wheeled tent') at 1000-1 indicates that he appeared on stage mounted upon this vehicle, thought to be an appropriately shabby alternative to the war chariot referred to at 84. Taplin, however (1977, pp. 121-3), has argued that Xerxes entered on foot; in support of his argument he notes Xerxes'

reference to the vigour having gone from his limbs (913), which he claims implies that Xerxes was on foot. He comments (p. 123), 'Here the tented wagon would not only be pointless, it would positively detract and distract from the stylized visual presentation of the fall of Persia, and would spoil Xerxes' entry', and stresses the need for a contrast between this and the spectacle of the queen's first entry,[44] as well as that of Darius.

As Taplin points out (pp. 76-7), entries on a chariot seem to have been common for royalty in tragedy, so it would be of even greater significance were Xerxes to enter on foot. His thesis is an attractive one in the light of the present discussion, although is very hard to reconcile with the Chorus' reference to Xerxes' vehicle at 1000-1. One further significant aspect of Xerxes' arrival, however, which is surely beyond doubt, is the fact that he arrives on stage alone, unaccompanied by his entourage; this is unusual enough for the Chorus to express their astonishment (1000-1), and Xerxes himself notes the absence of escorts at 1036. The fact that he is alone where more usually he would be accompanied by a retinue not only draws attention to the loss of the majority of the Persian army but also serves to diminish the king in stature.

The contrast with the entrances of the queen and Darius is also highlighted by the Chorus' reaction to Xerxes. In the case of both Xerxes' mother and his father, far more ceremonial is practised by the Persian elders than for their returning king. On seeing the queen the Chorus say, 'We prostrate ourselves, and must all address her with words of salutation' (152-4). The use of the verb προσπίτνω,

[44] At 607 it becomes apparent from the text that the queen made her initial entry in a chariot and finely dressed (this would of course have been clear to the audience on her entrance at 155).

here translated as 'prostrate', refers to the Persian practice of *proskynēsis*, doing obeisance before figures in authority. This was thought of by the Greeks as appropriate as part of the worship of gods, but utterly abhorrent if practised in reverence to a mortal, and, as such, a characteristic custom of their barbarian enemies.[45] Following the queen's entrance here the Chorus go on to address her with a string of honorific greetings (155-8). Similarly, the entrance of Darius' ghost is heralded by a great deal of ceremony, primarily in the form of the necromantic hymn sung by the Chorus summoning his ghost (623-80). When he enters, Darius refers to the fact that the ground is being beaten (683) in the ritual actions of the Chorus. Hall (1996 *ad loc.*) suggests that this implies that the Chorus are on the ground, in a gesture akin to *proskynēsis*; this impression is apparently confirmed when the Chorus go on to say that they cannot look at or speak to Darius (694-6): 'Awesome to me is the sight of you, awesome it is to me to speak face to face with you, on account of my old fear of you.' By contrast, when Xerxes appears on stage there is no evidence that the Chorus perform *proskynēsis* before him, and any honorific salutations are entirely absent. Indeed, they do not address him with any formal greeting whatsoever, and their first words to him are spoken as they join his lament. Inevitably, this lack of ceremony adds to the impression that Xerxes has been stripped of the trappings of royalty by which he has been defined so far.

A further question raised by the entrance of Xerxes is that of the identity of the actor playing the king. As Aeschylus used only two actors in his tragedies it

[45] See Hall 1989, pp. 96-7 on the Persian practice of *proskynēsis* as perceived by the Greeks. There has been a great deal of discussion of the practice in relation to Alexander the Great. See, for example, Balsdon 1950, pp. 371-82, who also discusses the origin of the term and its meaning in Greek practice (p. 374).

would have been necessary in the *Persae*, as often, for each to play more than one character. Earlier in the play the queen is seen on stage with either the messenger or Darius; therefore one actor must have played the queen, and one the messenger *and* Darius. Of course Xerxes appears on stage with only the Chorus and no other key character, so he could have been played *either* by the actor playing his mother *or* by the person who played his father. Each of these has its own implications for the character of Xerxes; were he played by the same individual as played Darius this might well have pointed up still further the contrast in the play between father and son, as discussed earlier. It is, however, equally attractive for the purposes of this discussion to suggest that he was played by the figure who had acted as the queen; this is also perhaps more likely given that the Darius/messenger actor had already taken two parts as well as the fact that the queen, otherwise inexplicably, does not remain on stage for the final scene.[46] Were the queen and Xerxes played by the same man this would perhaps have heightened the allusions made to both the king's effeminacy and the excessive influence of the women at his court, both of which are frequently highlighted by Greek sources as aspects of Xerxes' reign; the link of the barbarian and the feminine in Greek thought is well attested. As Pavlovskis (1977, p. 114, n. 6) has pointed out, such a link made between the queen and Xerxes would also have been more appropriate than the suggestion of a resemblance between Xerxes and his father, when Aeschylus makes such strong assertions that Xerxes behaved unlike Darius. Aside from this dramatic necessity there would also have been the practical consideration that an actor playing a

[46] Taplin 1977, p. 120, however, dismisses the need for the actor playing the queen to play Xerxes as well, asserting that the actor who played the messenger and Darius could easily have done so.

female character would have needed the ability to speak in a higher pitch; this is a talent which may well have proved useful in singing the lament of Xerxes.[47]

The fact that Xerxes does not actually speak but only sings his lament, or *thrēnos*, is a crucial aspect of the performance here. Hall (1999, p. 96) notes that, in articulating his feelings purely in song rather than in speech, Xerxes is unique amongst the leading characters in extant tragedy. She later (p. 100) offers some possible suggestions as to why the king does not speak: perhaps because he is the archetypal barbarian; or because the scene is particularly ritualistic, acting like a funerary *kommos*; maybe it is a means of effeminizing him (because of the association of funerary lamentation with women in Greek thought); or it is possibly a result of the fact that he is emotionally disturbed. Each of these factors undoubtedly contributes to Aeschylus' decision to present his Xerxes in this way; the end result is that he is detached still further from the world of reality and in particular from the reality of the public, civic discourse of the Athenian fifth-century male audience.[48] The effeminization of the Persian king is clearly especially crucial here.[49] His display of private emotion in public here also reiterates what the messenger had told us earlier about the king's outburst at Salamis (465-70; see above, pp. 51-2).

During the course of the king's lament the stress is wholly upon what has been lost. Two issues are emphasised in particular: the destruction of the Persian army,

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[47] We might compare here Euripides' *Orestes*, in which the effeminized Menelaus was played by the same actor who played Electra; see Damen 1990 p. 141.
[48] Hall 1999, p. 112: 'Aeschylean and Euripidean singers are generally the 'others' of the free Greek male in his prime.'
[49] See Foley 1993 for examples of the association between female characters and lamentation in tragedy.

and the shabby garments which Xerxes now wears in place of his once splendid robes. The loss of the army is of course one of the crucial themes of the play as a whole, having first been announced by the messenger, whose speech had contained a catalogue of the dead (302-30), which served to remind us of the Chorus' initial list of Xerxes' commanders (21-55). The reversal there is stressed by the fact that the messenger mentions several names which had all been included in the Chorus' original catalogue: Artembares, Arsames, Arkteus, Amistris, Ariomardos and Tharybis are all listed as now among the lost. Later the messenger comments that 'never in a single day has such a large number of men died' (431-2).

The destruction at Salamis was also compounded by the disasters which befell the army on its homeward journey, when many drowned in the Strymon as the ice upon which they crossed was melted by the sun (495-507). Sommerstein (1996, p. 84) notes that this incident mirrors the earlier bridging of the Hellespont where Xerxes tried to turn water into land; here the gods have done the same (and then turned it back again), and the ultimate result is total disaster for the humans concerned. It is worth noting here, however, that the presentation of the Greek victory as a total disaster for Xerxes was all part of the Greek construction of the Persian Wars. There is no evidence to suggest that the Persians necessarily viewed it as such a complete calamity; after all, the campaign related only to a very small frontier of the vast Persian empire. No territory was lost, but instead the Persians simply failed to expand in this direction, and the empire was obviously not significantly weakened; it was to continue for another century and a half.

The appearance of Xerxes now presents a fresh opportunity for lamentation over the destruction of his men. The Chorus remind us of the masses who have perished (924-7): 'Many men (πολλοὶ φῶτες) from Agbatana – the flower of the land, archers, a great thicket of men, tens of thousands of them (πάνυ ταρφύς τις / μυριὰς ἀνδρῶν) – are destroyed.' They later compile lists of all those who are missing, again in a reversal of their opening catalogue (958-61, 967-72, 981-4, 992-9). This obsession of the Chorus with what has been lost, rather than with the king's own personal well-being, acts as a reminder that Xerxes is defined wholly by his army and his resources; he is reduced to nothing without these. This destruction of the army is mirrored by the tattered state of Xerxes' clothing; the king himself actually makes this analogy. The following exchange takes place between Xerxes and the Chorus (1017-23):

Chorus: Is anything left of the Persians, O man of great calamity?

Xerxes: Do you see what remains of my outfit?

Chorus: I see, I see.

Xerxes: And this quiver…

Chorus: What is this that you say has survived?

Xerxes: …the storehouse of arrows?

Chorus: Little enough out of so much (βαιά γ' ὡς ἀπὸ πολλῶν).

The implication is that the army is in as sorry a state as the king's ragged robes; these clothes represent the rich material possessions which are another of the key defining features of the Persian king in Greek discourse. The arrival of Xerxes in his rags has already been anticipated by Darius, who earlier told the queen to find her son some suitable clothing as he had ripped his robes in his grief (832-6, cf.

847-8, where the queen says that she intends to bring from the palace some new robes for Xerxes). Perhaps even more significantly here, Xerxes has returned with an apparently empty quiver and there is no mention of his bow. The absence of the weapons customarily used by the Greeks to define the Persians here is highly significant; the loss of his bow and arrows symbolises not only Xerxes' loss of his army but also the erosion of his own identity. The emptying of his quiver mirrors also the emptying out of Asia by the king; Darius says at 761 that the entire city of Susa has been emptied out as never before.[50] Thus, as Bacon (1961, p. 3) has pointed out, the reference to the emptying of Xerxes' quiver 'makes it part of a complex of symbols of outpouring, squandering, draining, which are both an emotional and a moral statement about Xerxes'. Xerxes later reaffirms the reason for his sorry state, telling the Chorus, 'I ripped my gown because of the disaster which happened' (1030). He goes on to complete the analogy between his loss of men and his ripped garments by using the word γυμνός, 'bare', or 'naked', to refer to the loss of his escorts.[51]

So, it seems, the great Persian king has been stripped bare in all respects, debilitated and exposed by the playwright as wholly insubstantial.[52] The removal of Xerxes' defining attributes, his vast resources and his material wealth, serves to obliterate the king still further; he seems, in the final scene, even less substantial than the shadow to which we were accustomed before his appearance on stage. The literary erasure of Xerxes perhaps mirrors in a sense what the

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[50] We might contrast here the emptying out of Athens before Salamis which was a matter of pride for the Athenians. See Harrison 2000, pp. 71-2.

[51] 1036: γυμνός εἰμι προπομπῶν: 'I am stripped bare of escorts.'

[52] Thalmann 1980, pp. 267-70 discusses the significance of the emphasis on the Persians' rich clothing (and its removal or destruction), suggesting that 'Because fine robes are a sign of royal station and power, their tatters ought to stand for the loss of that power' (p. 270).

Greeks felt they had done in the sea at Salamis and on the battlefield at Plataea; they had killed his entourage and taken his possessions as spoil, thus depriving the king of all that they perceived as identifying him. Ironically, however, Aeschylus has done anything but lay bare the true character of Xerxes; the Persian king remains an enigma, brought to us only through the Greek perception of his personality. The resulting portrayal is the product of a combination of a fundamental lack of knowledge of the Persian king on the part of the Greeks and a desire, whether conscious or unconscious, to marginalise him as far as possible. The *Persae* thus demonstrates that from the outset Xerxes was an enigma as far as the Greeks were concerned – and that was how he would remain.

CHAPTER THREE

Silencing the Barbarian: The Herodotean Perspective

Although Herodotus' historiographical and ethnographic investigation of Persian matters was not the only such work from the fifth century, his is the only one to have survived. The evidence shows that other writers around this time demonstrated a similar interest in eastern history and customs. We know, for example, that Hellanicus of Lesbos wrote a wide range of ethnographic works ranging from areas in Greece to foreign countries including Persia. Charon of Lampsacus is said by the Suda to have written, among other things, a *Persica* in two books.[1] It is, however, impossible to deduce from the scant remains of the works of these authors whether they dealt with Xerxes in any detail. In Herodotus' work, the figure of Xerxes, as leader of the second Persian invasion, is more fully explored than in any other extant account of the Persian Wars.

The action of the campaign appears at first glance to be driven by the desires of this ruthless and ambitious oriental despot whose quest for imperial expansion and revenge against Athens is the starting point of the narrative of Herodotus' final three books. It might, therefore, be natural to assume that the Persian king himself would be the central figure for much of the story in this section of the *Histories*. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that, whilst Xerxes does indeed feature repeatedly in the narrative his actual influence on events and position in relation to the action is often marginalised; where we may expect a domineering presence we frequently find a shadowy figure whose personality is

[1] On the contemporaries of Herodotus see Fowler 1996.

reduced to a series of clichés and who, far from being instrumental in the invasion of Greece, often acts as little more than a puppet who carries out the wishes of others. Xerxes is here seen within what Hartog has described as a 'rhetoric of otherness' (1988, see especially pp. 212-59) by which Herodotus conveys to his audience a sense of the difference of non-Greek from Greek peoples. Hartog writes (1988, p. 375) that, 'The history of the Persian Wars, for its part, places the "we" on stage altogether explicitly, in the struggle against "them", and, as it does so it constructs for "us" a representation of the recent past and elaborates a new collection of memories centred on the *Hellenikon*.' We might say that within this binary opposition of self and other Xerxes provides the most extreme example of otherness which is possible.

Against this background the Xerxes we find in Herodotus bears some similarities to the character found in Aeschylus' play. As seen in the *Persae*, Herodotus' Xerxes displays all of the characteristics of the typical barbarian tyrant. Surrounded by the luxurious trappings of empire, he rules over a nation of slaves who are utterly subject to him; ill-tempered and cruel, he disregards the gods of the Greeks and, in crossing the Hellespont to invade Greece, commits the ultimate offence against those gods. Many of the motifs used in the story of the invasion are strikingly similar to those found in Aeschylus' play. It must be stressed here, however, that this is not to suggest that Herodotus derived his material specifically from Aeschylus; rather, the similarities between the two sources would seem to suggest that in the fifth century there came into being a pool of material relating to the figure of Xerxes which could be drawn on by writers in any genre. Herodotus was thus very much a product of his time – the

fact that he did not originate from Athens but rather from Halicarnassus in Ionian Greece serves to demonstrate that the tales seem to have had relevance throughout the Greek world.[2] The extensive scope of the *Histories* also means that we find here in far more detail a range of alternative methods of portraying the barbarian king; along with the by now stereotypical image of the barbarian despot there are also elements in the story of Xerxes which are not seen elsewhere or which are presented to us in greater detail than in any other account. Never, however, is an objective 'reality' possible; Xerxes remains essentially intangible and the images with which we are presented here are, as ever, telescoped through decades of Greek self-congratulation and anti-Persian bias.

The brutal barbarian

> We did not carry out this deed, but it was the gods and heroes, who begrudged that one man, impious and wicked (ἀνόσιόν τε καὶ ἀτάσθαλον), should be king of both Asia and Europe; a man who makes no distinction between the sacred and the secular, who burned and destroyed the statues of the gods, and who whipped and fettered the sea (ὃς καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν ἀπεμαστίγωσε πέδας τε κατῆκε).

So speaks Themistocles to the Greeks after Salamis (8.109.3), giving voice to a picture of the brutal, sacrilegious and hybristic despot who remains at the core of

[2] The issue of Herodotus' Athenocentricity, in spite of his non-Athenian origin, still remains open to question. Much has been made of his comment at 7.139.5 that the Athenians were responsible for the repulse of the Persians from Greece. Evans 1979 (a) has noted that the historian is fair to Sparta too, however, and also (p. 117) that he does not simply act as a mouthpiece for Athenian propaganda; for example, Herodotus comments at 8.3.2 that the Athenians made Pausanias' arrogance a pretext for their assumption of the Greek leadership after the Persian Wars. Thomas 2000, pp. 10-16 demonstrates that although Athens was the economic and cultural centre of the Aegean at this time, Ionia (although *politically* dependent on Athens) had not lost its *cultural* independence; this mix of cultures formed the intellectual world of which Herodotus was a part.

Herodotus' portrayal of Xerxes. Here again is the formidable figure who brought terror to the Greeks whom he intended to enslave. Once again, the picture of Xerxes we see here is a result of his being constructed as the antithesis of the virtuous Greek; this is the filter through which we receive our information. Herodotus builds up his picture of the evil tyrant by way of several anecdotes, each a snapshot of Xerxes' barbarity; many of these anecdotes were to find their way into the later traditions concerning Xerxes. The very first mention of the king in the *Histories* is one which foreshadows much later discourse concerning his role as destroyer of all things sacred; at 1.183.3 Xerxes is said to have stolen a sacred golden statue from a temple in Babylon, and to have killed the priest who tried to stop him from doing so.[3] It is, of course, in Herodotus' account of Xerxes' invasion of Greece, however, that the full force of Xerxes' monstrousness becomes apparent; his impiety reaches its height with the sack of Athens, culminating in the slaughter of those who sought sanctuary in the temple on the acropolis, and the burning of the sacred site (8.53.2).

Throughout the course of the invasion, the wrath of the king also manifests itself against particular individuals, who become the personal victims of Xerxes' invasion. The first casualties are the men responsible for the construction of the original bridges across the Hellespont, which are destroyed by a storm; these unfortunate individuals have their heads cut off on the orders of Xerxes (7.35.3). It is in the story of Pythius the Lydian, however, where we see perhaps the finest

[3] The image of Xerxes as remover (and destroyer) of sacred objects is one which is noteworthy in the later works of Strabo (see below, pp. 210-11) and Pausanias (pp. 271-6) in particular. The 'guidebook' style in which Herodotus is writing on Babylon here foreshadows these 'geographical' works in which Xerxes' impact on the material environment is of particular significance.

Herodotean illustration of Xerxes' cruelty. At 7.27-29, Xerxes had seen fit to reward Pythius generously for his hospitality in entertaining the Persian army en route to Greece and for his offer of financial assistance for the campaign. Shortly afterwards, however, Pythius requests that Xerxes should spare his eldest son from taking part in the expedition. Xerxes' reaction demonstrates his terrifying potential for inconsistency; he flies into a furious rage, and has the son in question cut in half so that the army can march between the two halves (7.38-39).[4] This kind of cruelty is both callous and exhibitionist and perhaps reaches its peak in Xerxes' display of anger against Leonidas after Thermopylae (7.238). Then, we are told, the Persian king ordered the Spartan leader's head to be cut off and fixed on a stake; this goes against the usual practice even of Persians, says Herodotus, as they, more than any others, honour men who have died in war (7.238.2).

The outrageous behaviour continues as Xerxes' anger manifests itself time and again. Herodotus tells us (8.86.1) that at Salamis the men in the Persian fleet did their best through fear of Xerxes as they knew he was watching them; this is painfully borne out by the story of the Phoenician sailors there who lose their ships and try to claim that this was a result of the Ionians' treachery (8.90). Xerxes, on seeing an Ionian ship fighting particularly well, vents his wrath on the Phoenicians by having their heads cut off, in a gesture of extreme barbarism. His

[4] On Xerxes' fickleness see also the story of Sataspes at 4.43. This man had raped a granddaughter of Magabazus and was to be impaled as punishment, but Xerxes was persuaded by Sataspes' mother to spare him on the grounds that she would inflict a more severe punishment, namely the circumnavigation of Libya. Xerxes agreed, and Sataspes was away for several months but failed to complete the circumnavigation; on his return he told Xerxes that he had been unable to make further progress because his ship had been unable to sail any further. Xerxes, however, still exacted the original punishment of impaling.

irrationality continues even on the journey home from Greece; in an alternative version of Xerxes' retreat related at 8.118, Herodotus recounts Xerxes' crossing of the Hellespont in a ship. When a storm arises, Xerxes asks the captain how they can survive it; the response is that the only way is to get rid of some of the men on board. Xerxes persuades the Persian nobles accompanying him to jump overboard to their deaths. On arriving safely ashore, Xerxes is said to have rewarded the captain with a gold crown for saving his life, and then promptly cut off his head as punishment for causing the other Persians' death! Although Herodotus doubts the truth of this version, the motif of Xerxes' inconsistent and frightening behaviour (with beheading as a favoured form of punishment) is a common one, clearly extracted from the general pool of stories relating to the Persian king.

Such cruelty is seen within the context of Xerxes' being Persian, and, as such, antithetical to all that the Greeks stand for and respect. At 7.114, for example, Herodotus describes the Persians' ritual of burying alive nine girls and nine boys at the Nine Ways, en route to Greece; he comments (7.114.2) that 'Burying people alive is something Persians do', and goes on to refer to a similar act committed by Xerxes' wife, Amestris. As a generic characteristic of Persians (as seen by Greeks), such cruelty reaches its peak in the figure of the king himself, who provides the ultimate example of Persian despotism. A similar phenomenon has been observed by Said (1995, pp. 59-60) in relation to Islam as perceived in Europe from the early Middle Ages on; the vast extent of the Islamic conquests in the East terrified the Christian West, and thus, Islam came to symbolise 'terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians' (p. 59).

On one particular occasion in Herodotus' narrative, however, we do catch a glimpse of Xerxes as displaying some compassion. When he counts his troops at Abydus (7.44-46) there is a brief flicker of humanity on the part of the king, as he weeps for the transient nature of human life. He tells Artabanus (7.46.2), 'As I was thinking, it occurred to me to feel compassion that human life is so short, and that, of so many men, none of them will still be alive in a hundred years' time.' In this spark of wisdom attributed to Xerxes, we perhaps see a glimpse of an alternative type of barbarian king, the wise leader; the story of Cyrus and Croesus, related earlier by Herodotus, contains similar wisdom on the mortality of humanity. There (1.86-87), as Croesus is about to be burned on a pyre by Cyrus after the sack of Sardis, both men reflect upon their own mortality. Croesus recalls the wisdom of Solon, that no man should be called happy until he dies, and Cyrus is prompted to reflect that he, a mere human being, is about to burn alive another mortal who was once as prosperous as he; as a result, Croesus is saved from death. In the case of Xerxes, however, the flash of insight into the instability of life is fleeting and we are led to conclude that his only sorrow is for the fact that his own power will be short-lived; worldly possessions do not last for ever. As Artabanus continues to reflect upon the delicate balance of human fortune Xerxes soon dismisses his thoughts, saying to his adviser (7.47.1), 'Let us stop, and not give heed to disagreeable matters, since there are pleasant things at hand'; within a few chapters, the king is counting his troops again, this time at Doriscus (7.59-60).

Later, we are offered another momentary insight into a possible alternative mode of behaviour for Xerxes. At 7.135-6, two Spartans, Bulis and Sperchias, arrive before Xerxes; they have been sent to him in order to die as atonement for two of Darius' messengers who had earlier been killed by the Spartans. In the first instance this story is used as an illustration of the value set upon freedom by the Greeks as the two men refuse to perform *proskynēsis* before the king. Xerxes, however, displays apparently unaccustomed benevolence in refusing to kill the two men; he announces that he does not intend to behave like the Spartans, who had murdered Darius' messengers. The gesture is less magnanimous than it might at first seem, however, as we are told that part of Xerxes' motivation for sparing Bulis and Sperchias was that he did not wish to absolve the Spartans of responsibility for their crimes; in other words, he wanted them to suffer an undoubtedly more severe divine punishment. Again, however, we have been offered a short-lived glance at Xerxes' potential to be more merciful.

These brief insights into the kind of king who Xerxes might have been serve only to re-emphasise his tyrannical nature as seen elsewhere in the *Histories*. Waters (1971, pp. 77-82) has attempted to rehabilitate the Herodotean Xerxes by demonstrating that in places Herodotus appears not to show hostility towards the king. He notes, for example (p. 79), the king's generosity towards faithful friends and servants, which again provide glimpses of the wise king who Xerxes might have been. As in the case of the Abydos incident, however, such flashes of wisdom serve to point up the contrast with the brutality of Xerxes as seen elsewhere. It possible too that these stories originated in sources less hostile to the Persian king at the time Herodotus composed his *Histories*; as such they may

be remnants of something closer to a Persian tradition. The fact that such hints of the positive gradually became buried altogether beneath Greek bias lends an insight into the early development of the Xerxes-tradition.[5]

The images of Xerxes as a loathsome and brutal tyrant which we have seen of course go hand in hand with the notion that he was already ruler of a slave empire and, moreover, bent on the enslavement of Greece. The Thebans who defect to Persia at Thermopylae are treated like the rest of Xerxes' subjects and, on the king's orders, are branded with the royal mark (κελεύσαντος Ξέρξεω ἔστιξαν στίγματα βασιλήια, 7.233.2), which defines them as the king's possessions. Steiner, in her 1994 study of the symbolism of writing in ancient Greece, has identified such activity as being a key part of the imagery relating to eastern tyrants in the Greek sources; the need to mark out territory, objects and even people in such a way is seen as distinctly representative of the foreign.[6] The key point about mutilation of the body is that for Greeks this was something done only to slaves, not to free men. Xerxes performs such acts of defacement of the body – including, for example, beheading, as seen in the case of the Phoenicians and the sea captain – arbitrarily, and in this way treats all kinds of people as slaves.

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[5] Another glimpse of a more admirable Xerxes is seen at 7.43.1-2, where the king sacrifices a thousand oxen to the Trojan Athena before crossing to Greece. This respect for local religion contrasts with the dominant image of Xerxes as destroyer of all things sacred. It may also, however, be an early hint of the comparison which was drawn between Greece's Persian and Trojan enemies in, for example, the catalogues of Athenian exploits in fourth-century funeral oratory.

[6] On the marking and mutilation of the body as a symbol of despotic power in Herodotus, see Steiner 1994, pp. 154-9 in particular, as well as Hartog 1988, pp. 332-4.

Of course, the key motif relating to Xerxes as a ruler over slaves is that of the Hellespontine crossing. We have already noted the significance of this in Aeschylus' version of the Xerxes-story (see above, pp. 36-7), but Herodotus too makes full use of the link between the enslavement of men and the enslavement of nature itself. As in Aeschylus' play, yoking metaphors are utilised by Herodotus in his descriptions of the Hellespont bridge; the verb ζεύγνυμι is first used in relation to Mardonius' reference to the Hellespont crossing at 7.6.4, and shortly afterwards Xerxes announces, 'I intend to yoke the Hellespont and take an army through Europe into Greece (μέλλω ζεύξας τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον ἐλᾶν στρατὸν διὰ τῆς Εὐρώπης ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα, 7.8.β2)'.[7] This image is carried over into the king's plans for the extension of the Persian empire (7.8.γ3); he intends that 'guilty and innocent alike shall wear the yoke of slavery (δούλιον ζυγὸν)'. In Herodotus' account of the building of the bridges too, these are consistently envisaged as 'yokes' across the water (7.33.1, 34.1, 46.1 and 36.4).

The description of Xerxes' treatment of the Hellespont continues with the usage of the imagery of enslavement; when the first bridge is destroyed by a storm, the king, in his anger, orders that the sea should be given three hundred lashes and for a yoke to be thrown into it (7.35). At the same time those ordered to carry out this 'punishment' are told to chastise the sea with the following words (7.35.2): 'Oh bitter water, your master (δεσπότης τοι) inflicts upon you this punishment, because you did wrong to him, although he did not wrong you. But Xerxes the king will cross you, whether you wish it or not.' In treating the sea as a person, and one who is entirely at his mercy, Xerxes demonstrates his mentality as a

[7] On the usage of ζεύγνυμι and τό ζεῦγος, see above, pp. 37-8.

supreme dictator, whose subjects are merely chattels; at the same time we catch a glimpse of his barbaric and irrational side, as the action is, in Greek eyes, more than a little ridiculous. Later (7.54) the king throws offerings into the Hellespont which Herodotus suspects may be intended to make amends for his treatment of it; this behaviour may well have some origin in Persian ritual, yet, seen by a Greek unused to such forms of worship, seems bizarre.

This transgression of the boundaries of nature is also a clear manifestation of Xerxes' hybristic tendencies.[8] As such it is linked too with the canal built at the isthmus near Mount Athos (7.22-23) and designed to channel the sea through a land mass so that the Persian fleet could sail through it. Just as Xerxes thought that he could turn sea into land so too the land was turned into sea by way of this engineering feat. Herodotus concludes that the Athos project was unnecessary, and was, therefore, simply an ostentatious gesture on Xerxes' part, commenting (7.24.1), 'Having considered it, I reckon that Xerxes ordered the digging only out of arrogance (μεγαλοφροσύνης εἵνεκεν), wishing to display his power and to leave a monument to himself.' Again, the alteration of nature is seen as a manifestation of despotic megalomania which seems to stop at nothing.

Xerxes at a distance

The ostentation displayed in the Hellespont and Athos incidents is of course also reflected in the physical trappings of Xerxes' kingship, as seen in Herodotus'

[8] Immerwahr 1966, p. 293, sees such crossings of stretches of water or rivers as a linking motif of the *Histories*, arguing that they are used always to indicate the hybris of the aggressive party. See also Immerwahr 1954, p. 28 n. 22 for a list of examples.

account of the Persian invasion. In relation to Xerxes' army numbers feature as heavily as in Aeschylus' portrayal, undoubtedly reflecting the very real fear which Greeks must have felt at his onslaught. The epigram cited by Herodotus as having been composed for the Thermopylae dead cites three million as the number of Xerxes' forces (7.228.1). Herodotus himself describes the army as greater than any other which was known (7.20.2), dwarfing even that which Darius took on his Scythian campaign;[9] he goes on to say that he took every Asian race with him to Greece and that, except for the great rivers, every stream was drunk dry by the army (7.21.1).[10] Later in the story of the expedition, Herodotus puts the number of Persian land forces at 1 700 000 (7.60.1) and tells us that the navy consisted of 1207 triremes, as well as transport ships (7.89.1);[11] he devotes a total of thirty-nine chapters (7.61-99) to relating the various contingents of the army and fleet, reinforcing this impression of the vast number of men and resources at Xerxes' command. At 7.40-42, we are told of the appearance of the army on the march; it is perhaps significant that Xerxes marches in the middle of his troops, rather than at the front. This positioning gives the impression that the king is cocooned by his men, if not himself dwarfed by their very mass.[12] Later, at 7.55, Herodotus again recounts the order of the march with Xerxes once more in the middle. Here he also refers to a variant account in which the king crossed the Hellespont last (7.55.3); still, there is no sign that the king ever actually leads the army.

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[9] See below, pp. 91-2, for discussion of the Scythian expedition.
[10] Cf. 7.108.2, where the river Lisus is said to have been drunk dry by Xerxes' men, and 7.109.2 where the lake at Pistyrus is drained by the pack-animals alone.
[11] On the question of Herodotus' veracity concerning Persian numbers, see Briant 2000, p. 527.
[12] For a similar effect seen in Aeschylus' *Persae*, see above, pp. 40-2.

It seems from all of this that Xerxes hides behind his vast resources; this is an impression which is reaffirmed by the description of the incident in which the Greek spies sent to Sardis are spared their lives and are instead shown the whole army of Xerxes in the hope that their report of this will dissuade Greece from any thoughts of resistance (7.145-147). The great Persian king, it seems, is nothing without his wealth and empire. He too appears to recognise this in places, as his obsession with reviewing and counting his troops is clear (7.44, 7.59-60). Shortly before Thermopylae Herodotus again reminds us of the composition of the Persian fleet and army (7.184-187). Here he tells us that, 'Amongst so many men, there was no-one who, in terms of size and beauty (κάλλεος τε εἵνεκα καὶ μεγάθεος), was more worthy than Xerxes to wield such power' (7.187.2). This apparently positive assessment of Xerxes may suggest that Herodotus' source here was Persian in origin; it has been thought that the catalogue of Persian troops came initially from a written Persian source, which Herodotus heard orally, perhaps at second or third hand, and so such a sentiment may well have been retained in the historian's relation of events.[13] Nonetheless, the description of Xerxes in relation to his physical appearance and the power which he holds makes us wonder whether there is any substance beneath the royal exterior; he is defined wholly in relation to his superficial attributes. Such a stereotyping of the barbarian in terms of physical characteristics is reflected in the fifth-century Hippocratic medical work, *On Airs, Waters, Places*, in which the author compares Asiatics and Europeans, relating their physique to the climate they

[13] On Herodotus' possible Persian sources, see pp. 597-602 of D. M. Lewis's 'Afterword', in Burn 1984, pp. 587-612; he writes (p. 602) of the army list that, 'A closer look at what remains suggests that there is not merely a [Persian written] list, but someone who transmitted it to Herodotos, embroidering it as he went along with a little more extra detail and explanation.'

inhabit; Asiatics are said to be of fine physique, yet, unlike Europeans, lacking in courage and endurance because of the temperate climate of their region.[14]

Dwarfed by his troops, as in Aeschylus' *Persae*, Herodotus' Xerxes is also detached from much of the action of the Persian invasion by way of his physical position in relation to the action which takes place. One image which is particularly striking in Herodotus is that of the king's throne from which he observes his troops. We first see this when Xerxes holds his review of the forces at Abydus where Herodotus describes the scene as follows (7.44.1): 'A throne of white marble (προεξέδρη λίθου λευκοῦ) had been specially prepared for him on a hill there (the people of Abydus had already made it on the orders of the king); he sat there, looking down on the shore, and could see both his army and navy.' In the first place this throne is symbolic of the luxury of the Persian king and, as such, it is one of several similar symbols. Shortly afterwards when Xerxes reviews his troops again at Doriscus we see him mounted in a chariot from which he makes his survey of the army (7.100.1); this is a motif which, as noted earlier, was used by Aeschylus and which in the *Persae* distanced the king from the general mass of his men (see above, pp. 41-2).

Steiner (1994, p. 144) has noted too that the very act of enumeration and recording distances the king from his subjects. She writes:

> The relationship between writing and computation is more than a purely formal one. Both operations demand that their practitioner abstract and

[14] Thomas 2000, pp. 86-98 looks at the Europe/Asia divide as seen in the Hippocratic treatise; she argues that 'the ethnography of the *Airs* is not primarily and exclusively about Greek superiority over barbarians: on the contrary it is about continents and general physical rules (climate, continents) that should in theory apply to all mankind' (p. 97).

> generalize the material he records, that he represent objects and men in terms of a single set of conventionalized and symbolic expressions. Both promote a sense of distance, of detachment between the writer and the object of his scrutiny.

In Herodotus' descriptions of Xerxes' reviews of his troops this distance is stressed by the presence of symbols like the throne and the chariot which set the king apart from the general mass. In order to undertake the review of his fleet at Doriscus Xerxes boards a ship and is at this point seated under a gold canopy (ἵζετο ὑπὸ σκηνῇ χρυσέῃ, 7.100.2); the vision is clearly one of idle leisure, with the reference to the gold which was clearly associated with Persian wealth. This motif is expanded still further with the description of Xerxes' camp and the extravagance of his dining arrangements at 7.118-120; Herodotus claims that a single meal cost four hundred silver talents and that the locals who had to entertain Xerxes were utterly ruined as a result. The historian gives a lavish description of the preparations for the king's supper, listing the produce which was required and asserting that the king also required vessels of gold and silver from which to drink. We are told too (7.119.3) that there was always a tent (σκηνή) ready for the king when he arrived, although the rest of the army camped in the open air (ὑπαίθριος).[15]

These symbols of Persian decadence also reflect the distance of Xerxes from his troops at large; in each case he is removed from the thick of the action. At Abydos in particular the fact that the king views his troops from on high stresses

[15] If, as Broneer (1944) argued, the tent of Xerxes was used as the skene for the Athenian theatre, it is likely that some of Herodotus' audience were particularly familiar with the image conjured up by this description. See above, p. 27, with n. 6.

his self-imposed superiority over his minions. This distancing becomes especially important in relation to the battles themselves. At Thermopylae, it is made clear that the king does not participate in the battle, but instead is a spectator, observing from a safe distance, and again seated upon his throne (7.212.1): 'Amid the onslaughts of the battle it is said that the king, watching, leapt up three times from his throne (βασιλέα θηεύμενον τρὶς ἀναδραμεῖν ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου), fearful for his army.' The situation at Salamis is similar (8.90.4); there we find Xerxes seated beneath Mount Aigaleos, opposite Salamis, observing the deeds of his men. As Steiner comments (1994, p. 43), 'For Xerxes, the battle is a spectacle, which he follows from afar'.

Meanwhile, those who perform outstanding feats at Salamis have their names and origin recorded by the king's scribes. It seems particularly ironic here that it is the Persian king seen in the act of recording events, and yet his version of the wars has been lost beneath layers of Greek prejudice and tradition. In spite of such meticulous recording on the part of the Persians (seen earlier also at 7.100.2, where he had records made of the army and navy at Doriscus), Herodotus had noted at 7.60.1 that he, the historian, was unable to give accurate details of the numbers of the Persian contingents, as no-one has been able to tell him (οὐ γὰρ λέγεται πρὸς οὐδαμῶν ἀνθρώπων).[16] The comment reveals a great deal about the nature of Greek attitudes towards the Persian invasion – generalisations about Xerxes' millions and the stereotypical characteristics of the king and his retinue were the order of the day, whilst accuracy concerning the real details was unimportant! It is for this very reason that the search for an

[16] See Steiner 1994, p. 144 on the gap between Herodotus' need for an *oral* source, as shown here, and Xerxes' use of *writing* as a means of recording.

objective image of the king beneath the Greek traditions has become virtually impossible.

Hidden beneath the trappings of his kingship and his vast force, and distanced from the real action of the Persian invasion, Xerxes is thus marginalised in relation to the battles of his campaign. This is of course taken to its extreme after the defeat at Salamis when the king flees Greece altogether. Leaving Mardonius in charge, Xerxes departs with the majority of the army. Although the plan is initially suggested by Mardonius (8.100) and supported by Artemisia (8.102),[17] Herodotus tells us that he believes Xerxes was too afraid to stay in Greece even had all his counsellors, male and female, advised him to do so (8.103.1). The plan to escape seems to have been formulated immediately after the defeat at Salamis, when Herodotus claims that Xerxes was planning to depart but tried to conceal his intentions from both his own troops and the Greeks by constructing a mole across the water to Salamis (8.97). Not only is he a coward, then, but he is also deceitful.[18] As a result of his departure the king barely receives a mention in Herodotus' ninth and final book and takes no part in the final decisive land battle at Plataea; Herodotus is keen to stress that the king was in Sardis throughout Mardonius' final campaign, reminding us on the return of the remnants of the Persian army to Sardis that Xerxes had been there since his retreat from Athens after the defeat at Salamis (9.107.3). The ferocious tyrant is thus reduced to a feeble coward who runs away when the going gets tough.

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[17] See below, pp. 89-90 on the role of Artemisia in the Xerxes-narrative.

[18] Note that deceit is a negative mode of behaviour when practised by Persians, but that Greeks can be excused such behaviour if it is in the interest of their own people; Themistocles provides the prime example of the positive use of deceitful practice (see below, pp. 81-3).

With this apparent paradox we are presented with a clear example of the way in which the 'othering' of Persia worked in the Greek imagination. We might ask ourselves how Xerxes could be both a terrifying despot and a pathetic deserter; the answer lies in the fact that we are not dealing with a simple binary system of otherness, but that the definition of the Persian very much depends upon what the Greeks wish to say about themselves. For example, if the Greeks are tough and hard-working, Xerxes, as their supreme opponent, must be seen to live a life of idle leisure. So too, in order for the Greeks to be paragons of piety and virtue, Xerxes must be a hybristic bully, abusing his extreme power; yet if the Greeks are to be seen as brave warriors it makes sense to portray their opponent as a coward who, in spite of his superiority in numbers, cannot win. Whichever way we approach the issue, the moral victory is always seen to lie with the Greeks.

Not only, then, is Xerxes a barbarian king who displays all of the worst characteristics associated with that position since at least as early as Phrynichus and Aeschylus, but, to add to his ignominy, he is consistently either obscured by the forces and wealth which he hides behind, or alternatively detached from the action of which he ought to be in control. In this way, he remains in the narrative as a foil for the valorous Greeks – this is the reason why complete *damnatio memoriae* is not possible – yet Herodotus' telling of events succeeds in presenting him as insignificant and removed from the real action of the campaign. These methods are, as noted, very similar to those discussed in relation to Aeschylus' dramatic presentation of Xerxes, yet are only part of the complex range of methods evident in the *Histories* by which the king is distanced.

Xerxes the anti-Greek

Within the portrayal of Xerxes as antithetical to all that the Greeks stand for and respect particular individuals are used in the narrative in order to point up this contrast. Three Greeks can be seen as crucial in terms of this representation of Xerxes as a photographic negative of the Greeks' virtues. Two are the Greek commanders at the land battle at Thermopylae and the sea fight at Salamis, Leonidas and Themistocles respectively; the third is the exiled Spartan king Demaratus, who appears at Xerxes' side throughout the campaign.

First, Leonidas at Thermopylae serves as a perfect foil for the Persian king. Where Xerxes has an army of millions (7.184-187) Leonidas makes the final stand with only three hundred Spartan soldiers (7.224.1, 7.229.1) and the Thespians who remained of their own free will (7.222.1). Although Xerxes tries to act like a god he is emphatically presented as being a mere mortal (7.203.2); by contrast, Leonidas' divine descent from Heracles is stressed (7.204.1), and yet, in spite of his divine ancestry, he displays the modesty required of a virtuous mortal leader. Where Xerxes only watches the battle from afar, sending his slave-subjects to fight on his behalf (7.212.1), Leonidas is an active participant, taking part as an equal and setting an example of heroism to his men, eventually dying the death of an honourable Spartan soldier (7.224.1, where he is described as ἀνὴρ ἄριστος). Leonidas and his men may lose the battle but they do so by putting up a dignified and courageous fight; Xerxes is successful only because of the treachery of the Malian Ephialtes (7.214-215).

The incident in which Ephialtes shows the Persians the secret pass by means of which they ultimately overcome the Spartans is demonstrative of another key contrast between the Greeks and the Persian king. Xerxes lacks the cunning to produce such a result on his own initiative; Herodotus clearly states that as the Persians appeared to be losing the battle 'the king was at a loss as to what to do in the present situation' (7.213.1) when Ephialtes came up with his plan. Tactical intelligence is a skill which is wanting here and the point is reiterated again when Xerxes is tricked by Themistocles at Salamis. Such lack of intelligence came to be one of the ways in which Greek thought characterised the barbarians; it is seen, for example, in the final scene of Aristophanes' comic *Thesmophoriazusae* in which the Scythian (therefore barbarian) archer is outwitted by the Greek characters on stage.[19]

Themistocles too provides a case-study against whom Xerxes can be measured. The naval commander's defining characteristic is his intelligence; we saw earlier (pp. 50-1) how Aeschylus presented Xerxes as having being taken in by the deceitful message from Themistocles at Salamis, which led to the Persians' being forced to fight in the narrow strait. Throughout Herodotus' portrayal of Themistocles this same perspicacity features repeatedly. His first significant action in the *Histories* is to interpret the 'wooden wall' oracle and to persuade the Athenians that the secret to their successful defence lies in their naval power, a power which, we are told, he was instrumental in building up with the wealth from the silver mines at Laurium (7.143-144). At Artemisium too he shows characteristic Greek cunning when he sends a message to the Ionians serving in

[19] Euripides comments explicitly on the archer's lack of wit at *Thesmo.* 1128-32.

the Persian fleet, encouraging them to defect to the Greek side (8.22); Herodotus says that his purpose here was so that if the Ionians did not leave the Persian side then at least Xerxes would no longer trust them when he heard of it and so would no longer allow them to fight with him.

Later, of course, it is Themistocles who persuades the Greek fleet to stay and engage the Persians at Salamis, rather than retreating to the Isthmus; here he makes a speech which demonstrates his tactical strategies (8.60), giving reasoned arguments as to why the fleet ought to stay. First, this will force the Persians to fight in the narrow strait to the Greeks' advantage; second, it will preserve the women and children who have sought refuge on Salamis itself; finally, if a decisive victory is won, the Persian army will be discouraged from penetrating the Peloponnese (8.60.β-γ). Never does Xerxes express such reasoned logic in relation to his battle plans nor does he encourage his troops in the manner attributed to Themistocles at 8.83.1-2: 'His words compared all that was best and worst in the life and situation of man; having advised them to choose the better and brought his speech to an end, he ordered them to embark upon their ships.'

Themistocles is thus both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds, a hero in the Homeric sense; this contrasts sharply with Xerxes, who appears to be neither, and whose men fight not out of pursuit of some virtuous ideal, but only through fear of him (8.86.1). Later, Themistocles' own participation in the battle is recognised; the Greeks vote for the man whom they believe to have displayed the finest conduct; all vote for themselves first, but everyone puts Themistocles in second place (8.123). 'Themistocles was acclaimed, and reputed to be by far the

wisest man throughout the whole of Greece (ἀνὴρ πολλὸν Ἑλλήνων σοφώτατος ἀνὰ πᾶσαν τὴν Ἑλλάδα, 8.124.1)'. He is later given honours in Sparta too (8.124). As was the case with Leonidas at Thermopylae, the contrast between Themistocles as active participant and Xerxes as onlooker (see, for example, 8.90.4) is stark.

Themistocles' cunning is at its most useful when he sends his deceitful message via the slave Sicinnus to the Persians at Salamis, under the pretence that the Greeks are about to flee (8.75); the result is that the Persians are persuaded to engage in battle in the narrow waters around Salamis. Aeschylus' version of the story had the messenger report directly to Xerxes (*Persae* 355-368) who failed to recognise the trick, although in Herodotus' account the man reports to the barbarians in general; nonetheless, the ultimate outcome is the same. Later Themistocles sends another cunning message, again via Sicinnus, and this time explicitly to Xerxes himself (8.110) – he informs Xerxes that Themistocles has prevented the Greeks from breaking up the Hellespont bridge so that the Persians can return home. Herodotus claims that at the time Themistocles had in mind the possibility that he might need to seek help from Xerxes in the future (8.109.5) – this perhaps looks forward to the version of the Themistocles story, recorded in later sources, in which the Greek commander sought refuge at Xerxes' court.[20] Whatever the motive, it seems odd that Xerxes fails to notice that the message was delivered by the same man who had tricked his fleet once before!

[20] The version in which Themistocles came to the court of Xerxes is recorded most fully by Diodorus. See below, pp. 169-72.

With these examples of Leonidas and Themistocles against whom Xerxes is measured, a picture begins to emerge of a character who is portrayed not in terms of what he *is*, but rather, of what he *is not* – Xerxes is shown specifically as antithetical to these two characters and more generally as representing all that is a threat to the Greek way of life. The concept of such ideological opposition is one which is forcefully expressed in de Beauvoir's concept of 'l'Autre'. Whilst her discussion is focused on the othering of the female sex, she recognises that the process is one which can be applied to all societies as well as to groups within those societies – 'no group sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself'.[21] Xerxes is the ultimate example of this process, representing as he does the photographic negative of whole strands of the Greek identity. As such we might say that he has no shape of his own, and that without the yardstick of Greek character against which he is measured, he is nothing.

Seen against Leonidas as exemplifying honourable and courageous leadership, and Themistocles as a model for the right usage of cunning intelligence, Xerxes cannot fail to come off worst. Our third Greek, the exiled Spartan king Demaratus, is used to highlight Xerxes' negative characteristics still further although in ways which are more complex than the simple presentation of Xerxes' supposed polar opposites in the figures of Leonidas and Themistocles. Demaratus' first intervention in the story of Xerxes comes at the beginning of Herodotus' seventh book, in relation to the question of the king's succession. Herodotus relates a dispute between Xerxes and Artobazanes, another of Darius' sons, as to who should succeed their father. Xerxes proves incapable of securing

[21] De Beauvoir 1997, p. 17.

even his own succession without assistance; ultimately, in Herodotus' version of the story, he uses the argument put forward by Demaratus to convince Darius that he is the legitimate heir to the Persian throne. This argument draws on an example not from Persian precedent, but from Spartan tradition, whereby the son born when his father was already on the throne should be the legitimate heir (7.3.1-4).[22] Herodotus goes on to say that, even without this advice, Xerxes would have become heir, yet still not as a result of the influence which he wielded over his father, but that of his mother, Atossa, 'for Atossa held all the power' (7.3.4).

Demaratus is used more fully, however, to present still further the contrast between barbarian and Greek. The promptings of the Persian king repeatedly act as a way into an exposition of the virtues of the Greeks; Xerxes is thus reduced to the figure of 'interviewer' whilst Demaratus puts across the authorial point of Herodotus in extolling the Greeks' moral qualities, and in particular those of the exile's former countrymen, the Spartans. At 7.101, for example, Xerxes questions Demaratus as to the likelihood of Greek resistance, thus providing an opportunity for an encomium of the Greeks. Demaratus tells Xerxes of the Greeks' ancestral poverty, yet shows that they resist both poverty and slavery through their virtue (ἀρετή), which they have gained through their wisdom and the strength of their law. He goes on to say that under no circumstances will the Spartans agree on terms which would mean slavery for Greece, and that they will fight Xerxes even if the rest of Greece gives in (7.102).

[22] On the succession question see Briant 2002, pp. 518-22.

Xerxes' scornful reaction – in which, once again, he displays confidence in the numbers of his forces and disdains the notion that free men would have any inducement to fight – serves only to make himself appear foolish; he is of course proved wrong when he sees the Spartans' last stand at Thermopylae. There, Demaratus is again the mouthpiece for the Spartans' noble sentiments, immediately preceding the battle. When Xerxes' spy observes the Spartans combing their hair and exercising prior to the engagement the king questions Demaratus as to the meaning of this behaviour (7.209.1-2). The response he receives (7.209.2-4) reminds him of his earlier mockery of the Spartan's advice; Demaratus then goes on to say that this is customary practice for Spartans who are about to risk their lives in battle, and that Xerxes is about to pit his army against the finest kingdom in the world and the one with the bravest men. Xerxes reacts once again with his customary disbelief, a response which is of course shortly to be proved foolhardy.

The final piece of advice given by Demaratus to Xerxes comes after Thermopylae (7.234-237). The Persian king, impressed by Spartan courage, asks Demaratus how best he might overcome these men. Demaratus suggests that the king should divide his fleet and attack Sparta from Cythera, but this is contradicted by a Persian, Xerxes' brother Achaemenes, who asserts that the fleet ought to be kept together. Xerxes once again displays both his folly and tactical ineptitude by accepting his brother's advice, although declaring that he bears Demaratus no ill-will. As a result the Persian fleet heads for Salamis; defeat, of course, is to ensue shortly. Boedeker (1987 p. 196) has noted that in this series of dialogues we find 'a linear progression in which the advice of Demaratus is taken

less and less seriously'. The consequences of ignoring the advice become more serious, however, culminating in the defeat at Salamis. The last we hear of Demaratus is at 8.65 where we see him warning the Greek exile Dicaeus against telling Xerxes about the omen which predicts the Persians' defeat. In spite of the benevolence of the Persian king towards him Demaratus is clearly still aware of Xerxes' potential for excessive anger; he warns Dicaeus that if he were to tell Xerxes of the omen he would lose his head (8.65.4-5). The figure of Demaratus is thus used in more ways than one to point up the contrast between Xerxes and the Greeks; not only does he repeatedly express the virtuous and courageous nature of the Greeks as contrasted implicitly with the Persian forces, but, by offering the sound advice which the Persian king rejects, he is also used to highlight, once again, Xerxes' foolishness.

Weaker than the average tyrant?

Whilst the representation of the Persian king as everything the Greeks are not ensures that in this sense he becomes a 'photographic negative' in Herodotus' account, the historian is able to marginalise Xerxes further by diminishing the king's role in controlling events. Where we might expect such a despot to wield uncompromising influence over Persian affairs, Xerxes is often shown by contrast to lack the authority thought to be a defining feature of tyranny. We have already noted that one of the key themes of the succession story at the beginning of Herodotus' seventh book was Xerxes' lack of personal input in determining his own fate; this failure of Xerxes to assert his own authority is also characteristic of the king's behaviour in relation to the decision to invade Greece.

There, Xerxes' actions are said to have been incited primarily by his cousin Mardonius,[23] who was driven by the desire to be satrap of Greece and therefore persuaded the king that an invasion was desirable by talking of revenge against Athens and the good things offered by Europe (7.5.2-7.6.1). Herodotus then lists a series of external influences which he claims helped to persuade Xerxes to undertake the campaign (7.6); the Aleuadae of Thessaly promise their assistance, and then the Pisistratids in Susa add their own pressure, through the agency of Onomacritus, a collector of oracles. The oracles are carefully edited so that Xerxes hears only those which suggest a favourable outcome for the expedition. In spite of his seemingly determined plan Xerxes still suffers the agony of indecision after doubts are planted in his mind by Artabanus, coming first to the conclusion that he will abandon his plans (7.12.1), but later changing his mind when repeatedly visited by a vision in his dreams (7.12.2, 7.14). Such hesitancy is the last thing we have come to expect from a Persian despot; consequently Xerxes is shown to be a weak character, lacking the strong personality needed by a leader of men.

We might perhaps conclude here that the fact that Xerxes takes counsel presents him in a more positive light, suggesting that he is here behaving in a manner more familiar to the Greeks than the imagined iron fist with which the barbarian despot was thought to rule. Waters (1971 pp. 68-9) asserts that the depiction of Xerxes as taking counsel wherever possible tells against the Aeschylean characterisation of the king as θούριος, or impulsive. In the context, however,

[23] We might compare here Aeschylus' *Persae* 753-6, where the queen claims that Xerxes was encouraged by wicked men to undertake the invasion of Greece. She uses the argument there in an attempt to excuse Xerxes' behaviour, but the effect is the same – he appears as weak and ineffective, unable to make his own decisions.

the dramatisation of these events makes Xerxes seem irresolute; not only is he indecisive, but he proves to be not particularly good even at being a tyrant in the mould which has been cast for him by the Greek tradition.

It is also notable that when Xerxes does seek advice in relation to the war, he frequently rejects the most sensible counsel. As seen earlier, this is clearly the case on repeated occasions where Demaratus is concerned. Similarly before Salamis Xerxes asks for advice (8.67-69). There, his folly is pointed out once more when Artemisia is the only commander to give sound advice by attempting to discourage the king from engaging in a sea battle; Xerxes ignores this view and goes with the majority who are in favour of taking on the Greek fleet. Not only is Xerxes incapable of making his own tactical plans, then, but he is also unable to spot a good strategy when presented with one!

The role of Artemisia here raises questions about the feminine influences which are brought to bear on Xerxes. We have already noted the role of his mother Atossa in ensuring the succession; a common aspect of the Greek presentation of barbarian kings is the presence of excessively influential women at their courts.[24] This influence often manifests itself in a pernicious way and may relate also to excessive lasciviousness;[25] in Xerxes' story, the role of women as sexual beings is highlighted by the episode related at the end of the *Histories* in which harem politics come into play (see below, pp. 97-8). Artemisia, however, is particularly

[24] This stress on the feminine may also be accompanied by the presence of eunuchs at the Persian court; they too are often seen to have excessive influence, especially in the account of Ctesias (see below, pp. 131-5 on Ctesias).

[25] See Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1983 on the Greek image of pernicious Persian women. Brosius 1996, pp. 105-19, discusses the Greeks' view of Persian royal women as powerful and cruel.

interesting here in that her influence is seen to be all for the good – had Xerxes taken her advice at Salamis, the outcome of his invasion might well have been very different. This might well be a local tradition from Herodotus' native Halicarnassus; as Artemisia was queen of Caria, which included Halicarnassus, the role in which the historian casts her may be, at least in part, an issue of local pride.

It is in an extraordinary divergence from the motif of barbarian kings as influenced by pernicious women, then, that this woman (significantly, an Ionian Greek rather than a barbarian) gives the best advice, yet goes unheeded. Not only does Artemisia become the wise adviser whose warnings Xerxes fails to observe after the influence of Demaratus has waned, but she also shows herself to be a steadfast fighter at Salamis (8.87-88); her fighting spirit prompts Xerxes to comment (8.88.3), 'My men have become women and my women have become men.' This, it seems, is a comment on the way in which the world of the Persians is the inverse of Greek normality; it also serves to point up the effeminacy of the Persians in general. As Immerwahr (1996, pp. 281-2) has noted, 'Artemisia shows that a woman can be superior to men, if she is a Greek and the men are barbarians.'

Father to son: the relationship re-evaluated

This combination of the despot who is unable to make his own decisions, being subjected to the influence of others (including even the women at his court) and the fool who fails even to take the good advice which he has sought, makes for a

picture of Xerxes as ineffectual in every sense. The lack of influence which he wields on the course of action is compounded by the intratextual references which we find to the story of Xerxes' father Darius. The account of Darius' reign is constructed in such a way as to foreshadow in many ways the actions of his son. Darius too was influenced by external pressure in his decision to invade Greece – and that pressure came from a woman, his wife Atossa (who, as we have already seen, wielded strong influence in relation to Xerxes' succession).

Atossa, having been induced to do so by the Greek doctor Democedes, is said by Herodotus to have first encouraged Darius' attack on the Greeks, by claiming that she desired to have some Greek slave girls (3.131-134). Waters (1971, p.60), has noted of this tale that, 'Clearly there is more than one possible implication of such a story; had it been told of Xerxes no-one would have doubted that it served to illustrate the weakness of his character. But it is told of the level-headed, far-sighted organiser of the Persian Empire as it became known to the Greeks.' He goes on to show (pp. 60-62) that Darius too in Herodotus' account has been painted on occasion as far from blameless, citing stories originating from sources hostile to Darius – in particular his ruthlessness in suppressing the Babylonian revolt (3.159), and Darius' cruel treatment of Oiobazus and his sons (4.84). The point is a crucial one for the present argument; if such negative stories were part of the Darius tradition too, why then was it Xerxes who became embedded in the collective Greek consciousness as the picture of oriental evil? We can only speculate as to the answer; perhaps it lies in the fact that, where Darius himself had not entered Greece, the Greeks had actually encountered Xerxes face to face, allowing for a more vivid conceptualisation of the malignancy which they had

encountered. The king's supreme outrage in entering and burning Athens (as well as the burning of Delphi) was no doubt instrumental too in creating the unforgettable image of the barbarian *par excellence.*

Where we do find evidence of parallels between the actions of Xerxes and of his father this serves largely to enhance the image of Xerxes as incapable of formulating his own ideas. Xerxes' speech to the Persians, initially informing them of his plan for the invasion of Greece, presents his proposal not as something original and new but as following on from the deeds of his father and his ancestors. He tells the Persians that he is not departing from tradition, but that he is following the expansionist policies of his predecessors by taking an expedition into Greece (7.8.α.2). After announcing his plan to bridge the Hellespont in order to punish the Athenians for what they did to his father and the Persians (the burning of Sardis and the defeat at Marathon) Xerxes goes on to remind his advisors that Darius himself had planned to march against the Greeks, but that his death had prevented him from doing so (7.8.β.2).

It is of course highly unlikely that Herodotus had any access to what was said at the Persian court; he is therefore free to elaborate in order to present Xerxes' intentions in a way which fits in with his own narrative scheme. Xerxes is thus seen as acting not upon his own initiative, but within the framework of plans laid already by Darius. This is reinforced throughout the narrative of Xerxes' invasion of Greece as we are constantly reminded of Darius' Scythian campaign which was also a disaster. Artabanus even appears as the figure who warns against the enterprise in both cases; at 4.83 he is seen advising Darius against the invasion of

Scythia, just as he tries to dissuade Xerxes from invading Greece at the beginning of the seventh book. Explicit references are also made to Darius' Scythian campaign; Xerxes himself recalls his march with his father on that expedition (7.18.2) and Herodotus soon reminds us again, commenting that Xerxes' army was even larger than that taken by Darius on his Scythian campaign (7.20.2). Shortly afterwards, the punishment inflicted by Xerxes on Pythius and his sons for trying to evade military service (7.39) mirrors that meted out by Darius upon Oiobazus and his sons at 4.84.

When the similarities between the activities of father and son become most striking, however, is at the points in the narrative where reference is made to Xerxes' plans to bridge the Hellespont (see 7.6.4, 7.8.β.1, 7.33-37, 7.54-56). No matter how grand his ideas may seem, the joining of Asia and Europe is nothing new. Darius too had bridged the gap between the continents at the Bosphorus; he refers to this scheme first in his conversation with Atossa at 3.134.4, saying, 'I have decided to yoke a bridge from this continent to the other (ἐγὼ γὰρ βεβούλευμαι ζεύξας γέφυραν ἐκ τῆσδε τῆς ἠπείρου ἐς τὴν ἑτέρην ἤπειρον), and to march against Scythia.' Significantly, the language used here is similar to that used in relation to Xerxes' bridge – Darius, like his son, refers to his construction as 'yoking' (ζεύξας) the water. Darius' actual crossing of this bridge takes place at 4.87-88.

In relation to the resemblance between the actions of father and son, Immerwahr (1954, p. 25) has written that,

> This parallelism in significant action concerns only the Asiatic portion of

> the marches; at the boundaries of Europe it stops. There can be no question: Herodotus intended the march of Darius to be the model for the more elaborate one of Xerxes. This in turn detracts from Xerxes' action, for in crossing the Hellespont he is merely imitating his father.

Noteworthy here is the contrast between Herodotus' portrayal of the father-son relationship and that depicted by Aeschylus. Where Aeschylus presents Darius as a paragon of good kingship against which Xerxes is shown up as a poor substitute (see above, pp. 44-7), Herodotus' Xerxes becomes in many ways a carbon copy of his father. Although the methods are very different the end result is essentially similar – Xerxes is ultimately diminished in stature. In both cases, however, Xerxes is seen to have attempted to outdo his father. Herodotus shows that his megalomania, culminating in the burning of Athens, was far worse than that of Darius and that ultimately this resulted in spectacular failure.

New aspects of the tradition: Xerxes as a figure of fun

Much of the preceding discussion has centred on the ways in which the *Histories* deal with the Greek experience of Xerxes' invasion by attempting to marginalise the ferocious and hybristic eastern despot, presenting him as antithetical to the values associated with being Greek, but also utilising a range of narrative strategies which reflect in words what the Greeks had achieved with the weapons of war; where possible, Xerxes is removed from centre stage and banished to a position of insignificance in this literary construction of him as the defeated other. It is impossible to judge whether this is a deliberate strategy on

the part of the narrator, or part of a subconscious cultural response to the events which had taken place in 480 and 479 BC.

Whilst most of the aspects of the portrayal of Xerxes by Herodotus as discussed here seem to be related thematically to motifs utilised by Aeschylus, thus implying some kind of common origin, there are elements which we encounter in Herodotus' work which seem to relate to a different strand of the Xerxes-tradition. Several times throughout my survey of the Xerxes as seen in the *Histories* I have commented on occasions where Xerxes is presented as being somewhat foolish; his consistent rejection of sound advice, for example, or his failure to display the tactical cunning displayed by Themistocles, and, more frighteningly, his irrational outbursts of anger. Again, these are aspects which often bear a resemblance to the Aeschylean presentation of Xerxes as young and foolish, yet Herodotus' presentation of the king points forwards to strands of the tradition not seen before now where the barbarian is subject to apparent mockery for behaviour which, on occasion, appears to border on the ridiculous. In Herodotus' work such actions are seen usually in the form of minor anecdotes which are related often without explicit authorial comment.

An early Herodotean hint of such apparently odd behaviour comes in the account of Xerxes' journey to Greece. En route to Lydia, Herodotus tells us, Xerxes, 'taking this road, found a plane tree, which was so beautiful that he decorated it with golden ornaments and appointed a guardian for it for ever' (7.31.1). To a Greek this behaviour would no doubt seem absurd, and the anecdote is one which, largely as a result of its comic potential, has found its way into various

later interpretations of Xerxes' story,[26] most notably that of Handel's Xerxes-opera. This treatment of an object in nature as being like a god is mirrored in the crossing of the Hellespont when Xerxes has offerings thrown into the water which Herodotus speculates might be intended as an appeasement for his earlier whipping of the waves (7.54.3). Xerxes is made to seem more ridiculous in his behaviour too when a Hellespontine who sees him making the crossing comments (7.56.2), 'Oh Zeus, why do you liken yourself to a Persian man and assume the name of Xerxes instead of Zeus, wishing to devastate Greece and to lead all men against her? For you could have done it without this.' Immerwahr (1954, pp. 20-1) interprets the comment as a witticism designed to diminish the grandeur of Xerxes and to prevent us from taking him too seriously; as such it makes the entire expedition to Greece appear as nothing more than a grand folly on the part of the Persian king.

This folly is highlighted still further during the course of the events of the invasion. At 8.24-25 Herodotus relates Xerxes' attempt to conceal the true number of the Persian dead after Thermopylae by having all except a thousand of the bodies buried and covered with leaves so that they could not be seen by the members of the Persian fleet. Herodotus himself comments on the idiocy of this, however, saying (8.25.2) that, 'by doing this with his own men's corpses Xerxes did not escape detection by those who crossed over to look; indeed, it was laughable (καὶ γὰρ δὴ καὶ γελοῖον ἦν)'. Later, after the final battle at Plataea, Pausanias stages a tableau using Xerxes' tent which is designed to point up the folly of the entire expedition once more (9.82); he has a Persian feast prepared, in

[26] See below, p. 279, on Aelian's comments on the story.

order to compare this to a typical Spartan meal, and invites the Greek officers to observe the difference, commenting, 'Greeks, I called you here because I wanted to show you the madness of the Mede, who, although he had such a way of life, came to rob us, who have such poverty' (9.82.3). Presented in these terms, it seems that Xerxes must indeed have been mad to want to add the small possessions of Greece to an empire which was already so huge and wealthy.

The most extreme presentation of Xerxes as absurd, however, comes in Herodotus' final tale relating to the Persian king. Xerxes' story as told by the Greek historian ends not with the king's death, as we might expect, but with a bizarre tale of harem intrigue, sexual scandal and violence. Kabbani (1994 p. 6, cf. pp. 14-36) has noted that in later European thought lascivious sensuality and inherent violence went hand in hand as characterising the East; these imagined characteristics were often used as a justification for western colonialism. The story which concludes Herodotus' presentation of Xerxes here in a sense prefigures these later literary themes.

At 9.108-113, Xerxes is said to have fallen in love with first his sister-in-law (the wife of Xerxes' brother Masistes), and then his daughter-in-law, whose name is Artaynte. Artaynte extracts a promise from Xerxes that he will give her anything which she desires, upon which she demands an elaborately woven robe made for Xerxes by his wife Amestris (the story functions in this way as another example of Xerxes' idiocy in falling for such a ruse). When Amestris discovers the affair she exacts revenge by having Masistes' wife (the initial object of Xerxes' affections) hideously mutilated; as a result, Masistes stirs up revolt in an attempt

to seek his own vengeance.[27] Harrison (1998, p. 72) comments that 'The story of Amestris' robe forms a sustained illustration of the way in which Xerxes' court degenerates into an orgy of sex and slaughter after his defeat.'

It is in such anecdotes that historiography becomes something akin to what we might term retrospectively as 'sensationalist fiction', rather macabre in its content; sex and scandal enter into the equation to make Herodotus seem to lean towards what we now refer to as the 'novelistic'. Thucydides later seemed to contrast his own history against this brand of melodramatic work by commenting upon the absence of τὸ μυθῶδες ('the fabulous/romantic element') in what he was writing (Thuc. 1.22.4); in particular, the female element is noticeably lacking in Thucydides' work. It is surely significant that our last image of Xerxes in Herodotus' account is one not of the all-powerful despot who rules with an iron fist, but of a rather silly human being susceptible to the blindness of lust, and worsted by, of all people, his wife; the image is one which looks forward to the harem politics seen in Ctesias' *Persica* (see below, pp. 134-6). This picture of the Persian king is a clear illustration of the point made by Cyrus and quoted by Herodotus at the very end of the *Histories*: 'Soft men tend to be produced by soft countries' (φιλέειν γὰρ ἐκ τῶν μαλακῶν χώρων μαλακοὺς ἄνδρας γίνεσθαι, 9.122.3).[28]

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[27] See Gray 1995 pp. 206-8 on this story as part of the construction of the male and the female in barbaric royalty; she maintains that Herodotean stories such as this are 'focussed on the otherness of royal barbarian power rather than the otherness of gender' (p. 208).

[28] Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1983, p. 32 comments that stories like the Xerxes-narrative at the end of the *Histories* are reflective of a tendency, which existed already in antiquity, 'to see the Orient as female, weak and worthless and Western civilisation as male, valiant and valuable'.

Silencing the barbarian

Herodotus' *Histories* thus present to us a broad spectrum of methods by which Xerxes, as leader of the Persian invasion, is 'othered', and made to seem far distant from the world which the Greeks themselves occupied. Herodotus utilises a range of different forms of silencing to present Xerxes as on the margins of the world of his audience at the same time as he distances him even from the Persian side of events by removing him from the scenes of battle, or by presenting him as subject to the influence of others. We have so far, however, overlooked one crucial aspect of the portrayal of the barbarian king by Herodotus. His text is rare in that it is the only ancient prose work where Xerxes is seen to be speaking at any length in *oratio recta*; this is apparent on several occasions throughout the *Histories*.[29] We might be tempted to assume, then, that Herodotus, by giving Xerxes a voice in this way, has attempted to present us with something close to an objective reality where the Persian king is concerned. In truth, however, the historian is free to embroider his account in any way he chooses and we cannot assume that the 'speeches' of Xerxes are any closer to historical reality than, say, the notion that his armies drank dry the rivers of northern Greece.

[29] The passages in which Herodotus' Xerxes uses direct speech are as follows: 7.8 – Xerxes puts his plan to invade Greece to the Persian leaders; 7.11 – Xerxes refuses to pay heed to Artabanus' advice; 7.15 – Xerxes relates his dream to Artabanus; 7.29 – Xerxes rewards Pythius for his generosity; 7.39 – Xerxes berates Pythius for requesting that his son should be spared military service; 7.46-52 – conversation of Xerxes and Artabanus at Abydus; 7.101-104 – conversation of Xerxes and Demaratus at Doriscus; 7.234 – Xerxes asks Demaratus for advice on strategy after Thermopylae; 7.237 – Xerxes pronounces Demaratus' advice inferior to that of Achaemenes; 7.88.3 – Xerxes comments on Artemisia's performance at Salamis; 8.101 – Xerxes asks Artemisia's advice as to whether he should leave Greece (after Salamis); 9.111 – Xerxes' conversation with Masistes, concerning Masistes' wife.

In these Herodotean speeches Xerxes therefore says the kind of things which the historian or his audience would *expect* the invader of Greece to say; for example, in his speech to the Persian leaders at 7.8 Xerxes gives his reasons for a planned invasion of Greece. One of the reasons given is that Xerxes wishes to extend the Persian empire throughout the whole of Europe and therefore to the edges of the known world (7.8.γ.1-2). Of course, there is no Persian evidence either to support or refute this claim, but by asserting in this way that Greece was the gateway to the whole of Europe the Greeks could magnify their own importance and the significance of their achievement in blocking Xerxes' advance.

Elsewhere the supposed words of the king often complement the other forms of silencing which we have seen in use by, for example, demonstrating his brutal barbarism (his words to Pythius at 7.39); by pointing up the contrast between Persian and Greek (his mockery of Demaratus' comments on the courage of the Greeks at 7.101-104); or by highlighting his stupidity (his rejection of Demaratus' advice at 7.234-237). We might say, then, that the whole process is a kind of literary ventriloquism through which Herodotus puts words into the mouth of his character as he plays out the drama. The 'speeches' of Xerxes therefore bear no resemblance to what was actually said any more than the singing Xerxes of Aeschylus' *Persae* offers a genuine representation of the king's words. There can be no objective reality; the voice of the barbarian has been silenced once more.

CHAPTER FOUR

From Thucydides to the Fourth Century BC: The Traditions Fragment

If even the accounts of Aeschylus and Herodotus, whose subject-matter appears at first to revolve around the actions of the Persian king, are constructed in ways that often result in the marginalisation of Xerxes, then the literary removal of the Persian king to the periphery must surely become even more extreme in historical periods where no treatment of him as extensive as these has survived. In this very basic sense, after Herodotus Xerxes becomes even less tangible than before; the very nature of the remaining material means that the tradition is more fragmented as no later extant Greek source deals in more than passing detail with the figure of the king in his own right. Our search for Xerxes from this point on unearths only snippets of his story which are scattered across a wide range of contexts both generic and geographical. Where the Persian king does appear it is frequently as incidental to the main literary purpose and merely as a small part of the whole picture rather than being of interest *per se*.

At the same time as this literal fragmentation of the tradition the variations in the way in which Xerxes is portrayed become more easily discernible. If Aeschylus' and Herodotus' presentations of the king showed to us that he could be viewed as both fearsome, violent and dictatorial on the one hand, yet also frivolous, feeble and inept on the other, then the sources which we find as we approach and enter the fourth century serve to corroborate the duality of the image. The motifs and symbols used to represent Xerxes remain strikingly similar, yet generic differences in the treatments of him necessitated a degree of variation in relation

to the selection and use of such topoi. Whilst, for example, Ctesias' concern for what we now think of as 'novelistic' details in writing his *Persica* produces his interest in the eunuchs, women and court intrigue of Xerxes' reign, the fourth-century Athenian orators largely work to an agenda which necessitates selection of elements demonstrating the king's ferocity and fearsomeness. Timotheus' nome *Persae*, meanwhile, in keeping with its baroque, theatrical tone, utilises for its Xerxes a mixture of perceived Persian flamboyance and hybris. This chapter will examine the ways in which the Persian king found his way into various genres of literature in the century from Herodotus on. Before looking at the sources which deal in more detail with the king, I will begin with a glance at two authors – Thucydides and Aristophanes – who have little to say about Xerxes himself but are nonetheless important for what they teach us about some of the ways in which the Persian Wars tradition developed in this period.

Thucydides' perspective on the Persian Wars

Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War finds little room for lengthy explicit discussion of the events of the Persian Wars, yet the events of the past do on occasion have a role to play. In his opening section, the 'Archaeology', Thucydides pays lip service to the wars against Persia although he gives little detail; at 1.14, for example, he notes that navies of Sicily of Corcyra were the last of any significance to be established in Greece before the expedition of Xerxes (πρὸ τῆς Ξέρξου στρατείας, 1.14.2). Later, at 1.18, Thucydides mentions the battle of Marathon by name, saying that it was fought between the Athenians and the Persians. He then goes on to say (1.18.2) that 'ten years after this the

barbarian (ὁ βάρβαρος) came again with his great expedition (τῷ μεγάλῳ στόλῳ) against Hellas to enslave it.' Although Xerxes is not mentioned by name here (nor was Darius in relation to the battle of Marathon), he is nonetheless easily identifiable in relation to the topos which refers to the great size of his army. By referring to him as merely 'the barbarian', and assuming, therefore, that his readership would make the association with the relevant Persian king, Thucydides reaffirms the claim that by now Xerxes had become in the eyes of the Greeks not just any barbarian, but *The* Barbarian.[1] We might compare here Thucydides' reference at 4.109.2 to the Athos canal which he uses as a geographical marker; again, Xerxes' name is not mentioned, and Thucydides simply refers to the promontory of Acte as projecting 'from the king's canal'.

Elsewhere, Xerxes is used also as a means of relative dating but without any more detail being given; at 1.118.2, for example, Thucydides comments that the actions which he has just described (the Pentekontaetia) took place in the fifty years between the retreat of Xerxes and the beginning of the present (Peloponnesian) war. This usage of Xerxes' invasion as a fundamental chronological benchmark foreshadows the use of the Persian Wars tradition in later sources, where the expedition of Xerxes was employed as a means of anchoring other events within a chronological framework.[2] The details of Xerxes' invasion are never elaborated upon, however, and later in the Archaeology the historian gives us a clue as to why. He asserts that, 'The greatest achievement of the past was the Persian War; yet this was quickly concluded in two sea battles

[1] For the expression, see Hall 1999, p. 100.
[2] This use of Xerxes' invasion as a means of relative dating was later used by other writers, including Polybius (see below, p. 159) and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (pp. 212-13), who both used Xerxes' invasion in order to establish the chronology of aspects of Roman history.

and two land battles' (1.23.1). His lack of interest in relating the details here (or even naming the battles to which he refers) is linked to his overarching literary project; he wishes to prove that his own chosen subject is of greater import than anything which took place in the past. Already, then, we are led to expect nothing more than passing detail from Thucydides on the invasion of Xerxes.[3]

The Persian Wars in general do feature relatively strongly in the oratory seen in Thucydides' history, and from this we can deduce that the motif of the ancestors' resistance to the barbarian enemy had become a rhetorical topos at least by the time of the Peloponnesian War; this foreshadows extensive usage of the theme in the oratory of fourth-century Athens. Recourse to the past is frequently made throughout Thucydides' history by the speakers whose words he claims to relate.[4] At 1.73, for example, the Athenian speaker gives a lengthy description of Athens' role in the Persian Wars in order to show Sparta that she will be facing a formidable enemy in any new war. Later, Pericles' speech to the Athenians prior to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War compares the achievements of the forefathers with the task now facing his fellow-citizens in order to prove that the present situation is less perilous (1.144.4).

Not only are Thucydides' Athenians keen to make mention of this past history, however, but other states have recourse to the Persian Wars too. This is most

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[3] An implicit comparison of the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars – as a war fought by the whole of Greece against a foreign invader, and one fought between two strong powers within Greece – has, however, been noted. See Rood 1999; he comments (p. 166) that 'Thucydides' construction of the Peloponnesian War as a whole suggests that part of the experience of that war…must have been the sense of a contrast with the resistance to Persia.' As an example of this phenomenon he examines Thucydides' account of the Athenians' Sicilian Expedition, linking it with Herodotus' description of Xerxes' invasion of Greece (pp. 152-70).

[4] On the rhetorical manipulation of the Persian Wars in Thucydides, see further Tzifopoulos 1995.

notable in the case of the debate concerning Plataea in Thucydides' third book.[5] Here the Plataeans appeal to their role in defeating the Persians as a means of defending themselves before the Spartans. When asked what service they have rendered the Spartans in the course of the Peloponnesian War they choose not to respond to this question, but instead refer to their predecessors' role in the wars against Persia (3.54-56); by contrast the Thebans, who are now being supported by the Spartans, were guilty in the past of medism (3.56.4). Whilst in most cases where the Persian Wars are alluded to the references are incredibly vague, this is one of the few occasions where Xerxes' name gets a mention; the Plataeans assert that they showed their worth when it was 'rare for Greeks to oppose their virtue to Xerxes' power' (3.56.5). No more details are given, however, as the speaker and Thucydides both apparently assume that the story is so well-known that their audience need no reminding. Xerxes, it appears, is here seen as being synonymous with the invasion as a whole.

Only on one occasion in Thucydides' history is Xerxes presented at any length. In an excursus on Pausanias in his first book Thucydides relates the activities of the Spartan regent after the repulse of Xerxes' invasion (1.128-130). Pausanias, after his initial recall to Sparta for excessive behaviour, sailed to the Hellespont 'on the pretext of the Persian War, but in reality in order to intrigue with the king, as he had already begun to do before, with the aim of ruling Hellas' (1.128.3). He then sent back to the king some Persian prisoners of war taken after the capture of Byzantium. At the same time, Pausanias wrote a letter to the king suggesting that he marry the king's daughter and bring Greece under Persian control.

[5] The Corinthians also mention the war in their speech in Book 1 (1.69.1, 69.5).

Until this point in the story Xerxes' name is not mentioned, so notorious is he; instead he is referred to simply as ὁ βασιλεύς (1.128.3, 128.4, and twice at 128.5). The first mention of his name comes at 1.129.1: 'Xerxes was pleased with the letter'. The text of the reply which Thucydides claims was sent by Xerxes is given (1.129.3 – Xerxes is named here too); in this the Persian king accepts Pausanias' offer and says that he will send him as many men and as much silver and gold as he needs.[6] Here we have a brief Thucydidean glimpse of stereotypical Persian wealth and resources as represented by Xerxes; although the Persian Wars tradition receives scant attention, and the Xerxes tradition even less in this particular text, what little we do see thus suggests a degree of stability where the image of Xerxes is concerned. Nothing more is said of Xerxes himself in relation to Pausanias' story and we hear shortly afterwards that Themistocles, during his exile from Athens, was received by Xerxes' son Artaxerxes (1.137.3-138.2).[7]

Comic Persia

The surviving evidence suggests that early Athenian comedy often expressed a particular interest in eastern themes;[8] the Suda records a *Persae* or *Assyrioi* by

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[6] Westlake 1977 discusses the possible origin of Thucydides' information on both Themistocles and Pausanias as seen in the excursus of Book 1, and posits the idea of an earlier written source which Thucydides saw fit to use as it confirmed his own judgement of the two men. On the letters whose text the historian reproduces he suggests (p. 103) that Thucydides did not compose these himself, but that he extracted them from the work of a predecessor.

[7] On an alternative version of this tradition, which has Themistocles coming face-to-face with Xerxes rather than his son, see below, pp. 169-72, on Diodorus.

[8] Long 1986, p. 4 lists titles of plays from Old and Middle Comedy which appear to suggest a particular interest in foreigners although these are not restricted to Persian themes. Schmitt 1984 discusses Persian colouring in Old Comedy, providing a list, with analysis, of Persian-inspired vocabulary and names. See also Tuplin 1996, pp. 141-52.

the comic poet Chionides, for example, and we know of Magnes' *Lydoi* from a brief fragment.[9] Later, the title of Pherecrates' *Persae*, of which only scant fragments remain (*PCG* 132-141), reflects a comic interest in this subject at the same time as Aristophanes' plays were being produced.[10] This attention to matters barbarian is no doubt partly a result of the comic possibilities presented by foreign languages or accents, unusual dress and customs, as well as by the stereotypes of barbarian luxury or stupidity which began to present themselves after the Persian Wars. At the same time, however, we know from Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (10) that around 425 BC Aeschylus' plays had enjoyed a revival, and Hall (1996, p. 2) notes that, 'The familiarity of the comic poets Aristophanes and Eupolis with [Aeschylus'] *Persians*...strongly implies that the tragedy enjoyed a second fifth-century performance.

In particular, Aristophanes' *Frogs* of 405 BC actually has the by then long-dead Aeschylus as one of its characters, alongside Euripides; the comedy parodies extensively the tragic style of both playwrights, and explicit reference is made to Aeschylus' *Persae*, implying an assumed familiarity with the play on the part of the audience. The character of Aeschylus as seen in the *Frogs* (1026-7) comments of his own work that, 'I produced the *Persae*, and taught (the Athenians) always to be eager to defeat their opponents, thereby adding lustre to a splendid achievement.' Dionysus then comments on his own enjoyment of the scene with Darius' ghost, and the Chorus' wailing (*Frogs* 1028-9).

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[9] Chonides and Magnes are referred to by Aristotle (*Poetics* 1448a33-34) as the earliest Attic comic poets and seem to have been active in the 480s and 470s BC.
[10] Edmonds 1957, p. 253 suggests a date of 425 BC for Pherecrates' *Persae*.

Had the *Persians* been re-performed at some point in the 420s this would obviously have increased the familiarity of audiences with some of the events of the Persian Wars (as well as with some of the crucial Persian stereotypes), thus providing more background material for comedians to work with. Phrynichus too seems to have been a figure whose work was familiar to the Athenian audience, as Bdelycleon refers to the Chorus of *Wasps* (422 BC) as singing 'honeyed old Sidonian Phrynichus songs' (μέλη / ἀρχαιομελισιδωνοφρυνιχήρατα, *Wasps* 219-20); Sommerstein (1983 *ad loc.*) notes a reference here to the *Phoenissae* of Phrynichus (he says that 'Sidonian' can be related to the play, of which a surviving fragment of a choral ode reads, 'Quitting the town of Sidon and dewy Aradus'), which dealt with the defeat of Xerxes' expedition.[11]

Aristophanes' comedies often make great play with current barbarian stereotypes as particular characters are mocked largely on the grounds that they are non-Greeks. Pseudartabas, the 'King's Eye,' in *Acharnians* (425 BC), for example, speaks nonsensical Greek (*Ach.* 100, 104), and Dikaiopolis comments on his bizarre appearance (95-7); the Triballian god of the *Birds* (414 BC) is also capable only of speaking gibberish (*Birds* 1615, 1628-9), and the Scythian archer of the *Thesmophoriazusae* (411 BC) is mocked for his stupidity as he is outwitted by both Euripides' ageing relative and the Echo who mocks his speech (*Thesmo.* 1001-7, 1082-97). The archer also speaks an odd kind of distorted Greek, and proves susceptible to the kind of lust thought characteristic of barbarians when he is distracted by a dancing-girl whilst his charge escapes (1176-1209).

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[11] *TGrF* 3 F 9. Phrynichus is also referred to twice in relation to the dancing at the end of the *Wasps* (1490, 1524).

Several of the works of Aristophanes also make play specifically with the period of the Persian Wars as the characters on stage reminisce about the 'good old days'; references are thus especially common in the plays which have old men as their protagonists or Chorus (in particular, *Acharnians* of 425 BC, *Knights* of 424 BC, *Wasps* of 422 BC and *Lysistrata* of 411 BC).[12] The old men of *Acharnians*, for example, are described as 'Marathon-fighters' (Μαραθωνομάχαι, *Ach.* 181) and notable for their tough fighting spirit; this hardiness contrasts, however, with their feeble appearance (204-22), no doubt providing good comic value. The old men who refer to their own glorious past are always a source of amusement; the Chorus of *Wasps* reminisce about the wars against Persia (1070-90), and use these memories to justify their present bellicosity.[13] Here the old men refer to the barbarian as having come and blown smoke over Athens in the past; the reference clearly relates to Xerxes' burning of the city in 480 BC.[14]

The nostalgic view of the past is used often by Aristophanes as a contrast with present-day degeneration, as seen in *Knights* when the old man Demos (as representing the Athenian people) is restored to his former glory which is identified with the period of the battle of Marathon (*Knights* 1329-34); in *Lysistrata* the Persian Wars are remembered as a time when all Greeks fought together against a common enemy as opposed to fighting against one another, as

[12] Byl 2001 provides a collection of Aristophanes' Persian Wars references.
[13] Note that the very presence of men on stage said to have fought at Marathon and Salamis is dubious; it is highly unlikely that many of the original Marathon-fighters were still alive sixty or seventy years after the event.
[14] Note, however, that there is some confusion in the Chorus' recollections; they refer to a land battle, presumably Marathon (490 BC), but most of the details mentioned related to the invasion of Xerxes ten years later. See Austin 1973, p. 134.

was the case in the Peloponnesian War (*Lys.* 1249-61). Elsewhere, Aristophanes also mocks the usage of the Persian Wars as a trite rhetorical topos; the Sausage-Seller of *Knights* flatters Demos with grand references to Marathon and Salamis (*Knights* 779-85).

Nowhere in the extant plays of Aristophanes, however, is the name of Xerxes explicitly mentioned,[15] nor is the Persian king who invaded Greece ever given a description. There are several cases, however, where familiarity with the Xerxes-tradition would have been important in order for Aristophanes' audience to understand allusions which were being made. At *Birds* 485-8, for example, Peisetaerus says that the cockerel is known as the Persian bird; Euelpides comments in response that this is why he struts around like the Great King with his 'tiara' (crest) upright! The stereotyped image is one which must have been familiar largely as a result of the Persian invasion of Greece, and which therefore perhaps stems back to representations of Xerxes (a recent revival of Aeschylus' *Persae* may well have familiarised the Athenian audience with the dramatic conventions relating to the appearance of Persian kings).[16] The stereotype of Persian royal extravagance is also alluded to by Aristophanes, most strikingly in the *Acharnians*, where the Athenian ambassador to Persia reports upon the life of luxury which he has enjoyed whilst he has been away (*Ach.* 68-78), and goes on to say that on his arrival at the Persian court the king was nowhere to be found as he was away with his army, defecating for eight months on the 'golden hills' (80-2); on his return he served the ambassadors whole baked oxen (85-6). Again the

[15] Sommerstein 1980, *ad Acharnians* 100 does suggest, however, that in the gibberish spoken by Pseudartabas here we can 'detect traces of the names Artaxerxes and Xerxes and the title "satrap"'.

[16] On Persian appearances in general as described in Old Comedy, see Daumas 1985.

images of luxury and idle leisure seen here no doubt owe much to the images of Persian royalty which were generated largely by mainland Greek memories of Xerxes' invasion of 480/79 BC.[17]

Although none of these references make any explicit mention of the figure of Xerxes himself, both the extensive usage of the barbarian stereotypes which we have seen and also the wide employment of Persian Wars nostalgia require a degree of familiarity with the invasion of the Persian king; if comic allusions are to produce the desired effect the audience must be aware to some degree of the original basis of the joke. There is no need for Aristophanes to mention Xerxes' name as the story of the king's invasion was obviously so embedded in the collective memory at Athens that allusions to it would surely be grasped without the need for elaboration. Although his works provide little information on the further development of the Xerxes-tradition they do nonetheless help to shed light upon the background of memories of the Persian Wars against which the image of the Persian king was set; the comic treatment of things Persian also lends an insight into the strand of the Xerxes-tradition – seen earlier as emerging in Herodotus' work – which holds up the king for ridicule by the Greeks.

[17] Some scholars have attempted to detect references to the specifics of Xerxes' invasion in Aristophanes' plays. Byl 2001, pp. 35-6, for example, has suggested a link between the burning of the *phrontistērion* in *Clouds* and the burning of the sanctuary (*telestērion*) of Eleusis by Xerxes' forces, as referred to at Hdt. 9.65; he also suggests (pp. 37-8) that there is a link between what the Chorus of *Knights* say about being unable to count the number of Persians and their ancestors' courage in defending Greece, and the conversation between Xerxes and Demaratus at Hdt. 7.100-102. Ketterer 1991 argues that the entrance of Lamachus at the end of *Acharnians* parodies the *exodos* of Aeschylus' *Persae*, where the defeated Xerxes appears. Such arguments are, however, extremely tentative.

The voice of Xerxes? Timotheus' Persian king[18]

The process of piecing together the remnants of Timotheus of Miletus' poetry reflects the fragmentary nature of the evidence for the Xerxes-tradition in the late fifth and fourth centuries. Until the discovery, in a grave at Abusir in 1902, of a papyrus roll (the oldest surviving Greek 'book') containing a sizeable section of Timotheus' *Persae*, all that we had of this poetic text, a 'citharodic nome',[19] consisted of three quotations in the works of Plutarch.[20] The new discovery consisted of around two hundred and fifty lines of text, some of which were badly mutilated but which were nonetheless complete enough to give a sense of the setting and characters involved; it is clearly a description of the battle of Salamis as experienced primarily from the Persian point of view. It seems likely that the surviving section was from the second half of the nome; the papyrus itself is thought to date from the early part of the fourth century BC shortly after the poem was composed.

The date and location of the first performance of the *Persae* have been the subject of much speculation. Hansen (1984, pp. 135-6) provides a useful summary of scholars' opinions on the matter; suggested dates range from 419 to 395 BC, and Mycale, Miletus, Athens, Achaia, and Ephesus have all been

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[18] The original edition of the *Persae* is Wilamowitz's 1903 work. Line references for Timotheus in the discussion which follows are those used in the edition of Campbell, *Greek Lyric Vol. V* (1993). The line numbering in Janssen's 1984 edition of the *Persae* is slightly different.

[19] West 1992, p. 216 describes the nome as a 'specific, nameable melody, or a composition in its melodic aspect, sung or played in a formal setting in which it was conventionally appropriate: a sacrifice, a funeral, a festival competition, or a professional display'. The citharodes were the great display musicians at Athens, and the term thus came to be applied specifically to their work; the citharode would accompany his singing and acting performance with the lyre (Van Minnen 1997, p. 254). On the history of the nome, see Hordern 2002, pp. 25-30.

[20] *Philopoemen* 11.2, *On Listening to Poetry* 11.1, *Agesilaus* 14.2 (= *PMG* 788-790).

proposed as possible locations. On the basis of the evidence which we possess, we cannot be entirely sure of the circumstances of the nome's premiere. For our purposes, however, such historical controversy has little bearing on the significance of the piece as evidence for ideology and its cultural and artistic articulation; the *Persae* should, in the light of the present discussion, be viewed as a stage in the evolution of the image of Xerxes.

One factor which ought to be considered, however, is Greek relations with Persia towards the end of the fifth century. Hose, in his response to Hall (1993 (b)), notes (p. 83) that Sparta had made a series of treaties with Persia in 412/11 BC, as she needed financial support for the war with Athens. As related by Thucydides, the first two of these treaties (Thuc. 8.18, 8.37) had asserted that all lands which had belonged to the present Persian king, Darius II, or to his fathers, should now be Persian possessions; Sparta was concerned that this could be interpreted to include northern Greece, and so in the third treaty (Thuc. 8.58) Persia's claim was limited to the Asiatic mainland, but was total there. This included the Asiatic Greeks with, of course, Miletus, from where Timotheus hailed. The irony was clear that almost seventy years ago the Greeks had worked together to drive out the Persian king, but that now some Greeks were seeking his help. In the light of an international political situation in which certain Greek states were intriguing with Persia the dramatic and poetic portrayal of an infamous Persian king from the distant past would no doubt have taken on a new significance. The general patriotic sentiments expressed in the poem seem to have remained pertinent for Greeks long after the original performance. Plutarch, for example, records a particular occasion on which the poem was re-performed;

at *Philopoemen* 11.2 (= *PMG* 788) he relates that in 207/6 BC, after his victory over the Spartans at Mantinea, Philopoemen received an ovation at the Nemean Games as the citharode Pylades recited the opening of the *Persae*, 'Fashioning for Greece the great and glorious ornament of freedom'.[21]

Although neither the subject-matter nor the concept of dealing with the Persian defeat from the perspective of the enemy is original, its handling by Timotheus represented an innovative approach dictated partly by the genre within which he was working. Timotheus was seen as a musical revolutionary in his time and by the critics of later antiquity,[22] and – as even his *Persae* itself suggests (lines 206-212, where he comments on Spartan censure of his work) – was not always appreciated for the innovations which he brought to his poetry. He was said to have experimented with metre, rhythm and language, as well as by blending various other genres into his composition, thereby pushing the flexibility of the nome to the limit.

What remains of the poem creates a general picture of the chaos in the immediate aftermath of the Persians' defeat at sea, evoking the sights and sounds of the battle in vivid passages descriptive of the general destruction which are interspersed with images of individual barbarians articulating their own experiences of drowning, or being dispatched by the Greek victors. Ellingham (1921, p. 65) describes the sea battle as 'a vortex of strange and unearthly pantings and gaspings and blows and splashes and curses, with an undercurrent

[21] On the significance of this line, see below, p. 125.
[22] See Herington 1985, p. 153, with notes 14-17 (pp. 274-5). Janssen 1984, pp. 151-60 discusses in detail some of the criticisms directed at Timotheus. For a twentieth-century critique of Timotheus' poetic style, see Gildersleeve 1903.

of deadly endeavour; and no words of the poet can be wilder than reality'. The mimetic aspect of Timotheus' poetry is well-attested; Herington (1985, pp. 153-4, with notes 19-20) discusses the dramatic realism of the performance of such pieces. Other titles attributed to Timotheus include the *Birth Pangs of Semele*, *Scylla*, *Cyclops* and the *Madness of Ajax*,[23] and, as Hall (1993 (b), p. 66) has commented, 'histrionic representations of persons undergoing physical and psychological disturbance seem to have been one of Timotheus' fortes'; it was said of the Semele of Timotheus that the noise she made was comparable to that of a stage-carpenter![24] Such sensational roles appear to have been seen as special challenges to the vocal skills of a citharode, and this evidence all therefore suggests that the portrayal on stage of a barbarian dying or in distress was perceived as something of an extraordinary stunt – akin dramatically to mimicking the agonies of a woman giving birth to a god, a Homeric hero going insane, or the howlings of an infamous sea-monster! The poem affords ample opportunity for dramatic licence most notably with its use of 'barbarian' dialect[25] and the wailings and lamentation of the dying enemies. There would therefore have been a highly melodramatic aspect to the citharode's portrayal of each character, which no doubt reached its height when the citharodic performer came to impersonate the Persian king himself.

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[23] See Hordern 2002, pp. 9-14 for evidence concerning the titles of some of Timotheus' works.
[24] Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 8.352a: 'Listening to Timotheus' *Birth Pangs*, [Stratonicus] remarked, "If she had borne a stage-carpenter instead of a god, what screeches she would be letting forth!"'
[25] Note, for example, the reference to the dying Phrygian's words as 'interweaving Greek speech with Asian' (Ἑλλάδ' ἐμπλέκων / Ἀσιάδι φωνᾶι, 146-147), and the mock-Greek which follows (150-161). Hall 1993 (b), p. 63 notes here that such linguistic caricature is rare in extant Greek literature, but that it is in a similar vein to the speech of the Phrygian Greek in Euripides' *Orestes* (408 BC) and that of the Scythian archer in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* (411 BC).

Within this display, Xerxes is the last of the individual barbarians to appear, although that is not to say that we are completely unaware of his role until this point. In the extant text our first reminder of the king's part in events comes before he actually appears, with the words of the first drowning barbarian. In his distress this barbarian makes threats to the sea itself, 'reminding' it of the treatment which it has received before at the hands of his master (72-81):

> Once before in your audacity you were yoked and had your turbulent neck in a flaxen bond (λάβρον αὐχέν' ἔσχες ἐμ- / πέδαι καταζευχθεῖσα λινοδέτωι τεόν); now my lord, mine (ἐμὸς ἄναξ ἐμὸς), will stir you up with pines born of the mountains, and enclose your navigable plains with his roaming sailors, you who are maddened by the gadfly, hated of old, faithless and embraced by the winds rushing to dash you.

Xerxes is not named here, but instead is presented to us, as so often, through particular symbolism which is used to convey his personality. Here, the striking image is that of the Hellespont bridge, described in the now customary way as a 'yoking', and once more seen as representative of the enslavement which Xerxes had planned to inflict upon the people of Greece, as well as upon the sea which surrounded their country. The fact that Timotheus' barbarian seen here is irrational enough to believe that he too can treat the sea as a living object, responsive to threats, is also reminiscent of Herodotus' scene (7.35) in which Xerxes has the sea punished with whips and chains for destroying his bridge in a storm.[26] Perhaps the drowning man can be excused for his absurd ranting, in the light of his extremely difficult circumstances; Xerxes himself, we may recall, was under no such strain when he issued similar threats.

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[26] On the Herodotean passage, see above, pp. 71-2.

Our first reminder of the Persian king in Timotheus' poem, then, as expressed by one of the casualties of his expedition, is of an insane bully bent on getting his own way; his belief that the sea could be 'punished' in this way would no doubt seem ludicrous to a Greek audience. The reference to Xerxes' sailors and 'mountain-born pines' (meaning the oars of his ships) as enclosing the sea hints at the key motif of the vast numbers of Xerxes' troops, another piece of evidence for the Persian's perceived extreme arrogance. At the same time, we are reminded of the king's ultimate power over his subjects; he is not a στρατηγός to his men, but instead is emphatically ἐμὸς ἄναξ ἐμὸς, 'my lord, mine'. In the use of these three words alone, the despotic implications are clear.

The same images with regard to Xerxes recur in the speech of the next Persian in distress. Although the text at the relevant point is mutilated and the sense is not always clear it is still evident that reference is made here to 'navigable Helle' (113), that is, the Hellespont as crossed by the Persian force. The Persian then goes on to refer to the 'cover providing a passage, which my master built far from home' (114-16). This again seems to be a reference to the bridge of boats between Asia and Europe. Here the blame is apparently laid upon Xerxes for the speaker's present troubled situation; the barbarian continues by saying that if it were not for this crossing, he would never have left Tmolus or Sardis to make war in Greece. Once more the king, still unnamed, is seen as master over slaves, with the use of the word δεσπότης here; the subject, in spite of the implied criticism, is powerless to resist the authority of his master. The Phrygian who later appears also cries out that he was brought here by his master (153-4).

Before we meet him face to face, as it were, Xerxes is therefore brought to us at one remove, by his underlings and through a series of symbols which are used to represent his key aspects. He becomes once more the stereotypical barbarian despot whose method of entering Greece with the yoking of the sea itself, mirrors his role as enslaver and as despot over his human subjects. We are therefore led to expect an unfavourable portrayal of the king himself, and in this way the stage is set for his eventual appearance. When the king is actually brought before us it is amid a scene of Persian chaos; as the troops flee they are shown as lamenting in their distress. What we see of Xerxes is his reaction to this final disaster and he is actually given eighteen lines of Greek to deliver in this 'scene', which takes place as follows (162-95):

> When they had completed their backward-moving swift flight, at once they threw down from their hands the two-pointed javelins, and their faces were scratched by their nails. They tore their well-woven Persian dress about their breasts, and an intense Asian wailing joined with their many-tongued lament, while the whole of the king's entourage clamoured as they gazed in fear at the impending disaster. The king himself, when he had looked upon his army rushing in confusion in backward-travelling flight, and had fallen to his knees and maltreated his body, said, as he surged in his misfortunes: "Oh, the destruction of my house! You scorching Greek ships, that destroyed the young men of my ships, a great throng of my contemporaries; the ships will not take them away backward-travelling, but the smoky strength of fire will burn them with its fierce body, and there will be lamentable suffering for the Persian land. Alas, wretched fate that brought me to Greece! But go, delay no longer, yoke my

four-horse chariot, and you, take my countless riches onto the wagons, and set fire to the tents, so that they may have no benefit from our wealth!"

Once more the general images associated with the Persians here adhere to the established stereotypes of barbarism; these are all prefigured in Aeschylus' *Persae* in particular.[27] The excessive lamentation on display would no doubt give to the performer a degree of dramatic licence, and was, as noted earlier, associated with women rather than manly warriors as well as being seen as particularly characteristic of barbarians.[28] The description of the lamentation on display here as specifically 'Asian' (169) seems to be disparaging in tone, stressing as it does the perceived relationship between such behaviour and the barbarian race. The emphasis here is also upon the Persians as running away in their panic as stressed by the vocabulary relating to their flight; παλίμπορον, ταχύπορον and παλινπόρευτον, for example (162, 163, 173).

When we finally meet the king himself he is again left unnamed, being referred to twice as simply βασιλέυς (171, 174). Whilst this implies, on the one hand, that the poet felt no need to mention his name, so well known was he by this point, on the other, it might also suggest that his identity as an individual had ceased to be important; he was simply a faceless king of Persia, behaving in the typical manner of any such tyrant.[29] As noted above, in the light of events in Greece surrounding the performance of the poem this could well be taken as a

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[27] For discussion of the influence of Aeschylus on Timotheus' *Persae* in general, see Croiset 1903, pp. 330-5 and Ebeling 1925, p. 322.
[28] See Hall 1989, pp. 83-4 and 1993 (a), p. 120.
[29] The blending of the Persian kings into one generic stereotype became common in the fourth century. See below, pp. 148-51.

reminder of the current Persian king, Darius II, with whom the Spartans and Athenians were involved in negotiations and treaties at various stages of the Peloponnesian War.

Xerxes himself joins in the Persians' lament, performing all of the actions associated with excessive mourning – falling to his knees and injuring his own body.[30] Noticeably, however, he is once again detached from the action; the use of the Greek verb ἐσεῖδε here (173-4) reminds us that, as in Aeschylus' and Herodotus' accounts of Salamis, he is merely an observer, rather than being an active participant in the action which is taking place. If, then, his men are stereotypical cowardly barbarians for fleeing the disaster, it would be logical to conclude that Xerxes is even more of a coward, having had no personal involvement in the danger from the start. The use of the naval metaphor to refer to Xerxes at line 177, κυμαίνων τύχαισιν ('as he surged in misfortunes'), is particularly ironic; he has had no direct experience of surging at sea upon one of the ships which have been destroyed, and so the only way in which the verb can be applied to him is in relation to his detached reaction to the disaster, from his position of safety on land.[31] Xerxes' response to events is thus reduced to the empathetic feelings evoked in a spectator of a tragedy, apparently saddened by what he sees, although not directly affected; we are reminded that there is no risk to his life by contrast with the men whose death throes we have already heard.

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[30] Compare here Aeschylus' Xerxes, who tears his robes (Aeschylus, *Persae* 468, 1030).

[31] Similarly, at Aeschylus' *Persae* 1046, Xerxes tells the Chorus to make a 'rowing' gesture with their arms in their grief (ἔρεσσ' ἔρεσσε). There too the contrast between Xerxes, seen here with the Persian elders who remained at home, and those who actually took part in the rowing at Salamis is striking. Hall 1993 (b) discusses the stereotyped view of barbarians, like those seen drowning in Timotheus' poem, as being unable to swim; Xerxes' distance from the sea here means that the lack of this particular skill will be of no personal consequence to him.

Hall (1993 (b), p. 64) writes of this passage that, 'A description of the defeated monarch when he had witnessed the sea-battle was of course a staple ingredient of Salamis narratives; what is remarkable about this one, owing as much as it does to Aeschylus and Herodotus, is the use of direct speech.' Later (p. 67), she comments that the use of direct speech for the lowly victims of the battle 'enforces identification with their experiences'. Where Xerxes is concerned, however, the use of such quotation seems to have a very different effect. It is hard to imagine that the typical audience members of a citharodic performance should ever find themselves being able to identify with the rantings of a foreign despot. The effect here is therefore to distance Xerxes even further from the average Greek; his experience as eastern king was as far removed from anything which was familiar to the audience of this performance as the birth pains of Semele as she produced Dionysus.

It has been noted too that Xerxes' speech here represents a change in tone, contrasting with the words of the barbarians seen earlier in the poem. Whilst the drowning figures spoke (or sang) distorted 'barbarian' Greek Xerxes' words are couched 'in perfect Greek' (Hall 1993 (b), p. 64). The tone has thus moved from semi-comic to apparently tragic, a tone which is reaffirmed by the allusions made here to Aeschylus.[32] Hansen (1984, p. 157) commented upon the 'almost archaic formality and majesty' of Xerxes' speech; this contrasts starkly with the innovative mixture of styles and language employed by Timotheus earlier in the poem. Once more, then, the king is marked out as being detached from his

[32] Van Minnen 1997, p. 251 points out that Xerxes' words have a tragic rhythm, that they incorporate a phrase from Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, and that the second part of his speech is reminiscent of Aeschylus' *Persae*. See also Hordern 2002, p. 214 on tragic echoes in Xerxes' speech.

subjects, this time by the very manner in which he speaks. The introduction here of the tragic register enabled the poet – and performer – to show off yet another aspect of his repertoire amid the range of dialects, metres and represented direct speakers in this elaborate aria. We might also suspect here that the musical mode changed too although there is no extant evidence relating to the actual melodies which can be used to substantiate this claim. Within a single work the poet exploits the vocal and generic range as much as is possible and Xerxes is used in the *Persae* as part of this display. It is impossible to deduce whether in performance this scene would have been played as genuinely tragic or whether the performer would have taken the opportunity to parody the tragic style, as is often the case when tragic song is imitated in the comedies of Aristophanes. Presumably the performer could have 'hammed up' the Xerxes piece here had he so wished, and if a comic effect was desired. Whatever the reality of the performance of this nome, Xerxes, by singing in this way, is located outside the sphere of normal Greek behaviour, just as Aeschylus' Xerxes had been.

The alienation of Xerxes from the Greek audience is intensified by the manipulation of by now long-established prejudices relating to the image of the eastern tyrant. When Xerxes' words begin they may at first start to evoke a sympathetic reaction. The king appears to be genuinely concerned for the fate of his navy, lamenting that these young men will not be able to return home but have instead been destroyed by the Greeks. As in Aeschylus' *Persae* the scale of the disaster being faced is increased by the fact that Xerxes was accompanied by such a vast force, as indicated by the use of the adjective πολύανδρον (181). It soon becomes apparent, however, that the king's prime concern is not for the

lives of his troops but for his own material possessions; his lament turns abruptly into a string of commands in the imperative as he begins to bark orders to his attendants, instructing them initially to secure his possessions. His concern is that the Greeks will benefit from this wealth; yet again we have an image of a man defined not in relation to his personal characteristics but by the rich trappings of his kingship. By contrast, a line from the *Persae* quoted later by Plutarch demonstrates that the Greeks as presented by Timotheus were seen to be unconcerned with such riches; at *Agesilaus* 14.2 (= *PMG* 790) the line 'Ares is lord; Greece has no fear of gold', is quoted. There may also be an allusion here to the Persians' bribery of the Greeks with financial inducements.

Xerxes now blames fate for the predicament in which he finds himself, lamenting, 'Alas, wretched fate that brought me to Greece!' (187-8). In reality, however, it is clear from the surrounding text that Xerxes himself is the root cause of the disaster; we have by now been given sufficient reminders of his tendencies towards megalomania and his actions as the arrogant master bent on enslavement of the Greeks. For him, nothing will suffice in moderation but all things are to excess. Any sympathy which the audience might have felt for the king must surely have evaporated as they considered the contrast between this impetuous despot and the men for whose death he was responsible. The fire and destruction which surround him are of his own making and thus the negative image of Xerxes as destroyer, rather than creator, persists. Of course, the burning of Athens was for a Greek audience the culmination of the havoc wreaked by Xerxes. In Timotheus' scene his vandalism is taken to its extreme when we hear the king order his men to destroy the Persian tents with fire so that the Greeks

may have no benefit from their wealth; the resemblance to retreating Iraqi forces setting fire to Kuwaiti oil supplies in 1991 is all too uncanny.

Once again, then, Xerxes is defined as possessing all of the characteristics presented in literature of the time as abhorrent to Greeks; he is concerned only with material wealth and is arrogant and despotic, yet at the same time cowardly. The contrast of defeated Persian and victorious Greeks is highlighted by the sharp transition from the king's speech to a brief description of the winners of the battle as setting up trophies in honour of their triumph (196-201): But they set up trophies for a most holy sanctuary of Zeus, and called on Paean, the healer lord, and with measured beat (σύμμετροι) they began stamping in the high-pounding dances of their feet.' These six lines of Greek convey a series of examples of the perceived ethnic divide between the Greeks and their Persian assailants. Most obvious is the image of Greek piety here with the respect which is being shown for the gods as contrasted with the Persian hybris which led to the invasion. Contrary to the expectations of Xerxes the Greeks show no concern for the material wealth of the Persians they have overcome, being eager only to give thanks to their gods for the victory. As opposed to the excesses of Xerxes and his men the Greeks are restrained in their actions; this is expressed most clearly in the use of the adjective σύμμετροι to describe the way in which they dance. Although it relates here specifically to the rhythm of their movements (an appropriate term for use in poetry) the word has connotations which relate also to restraint and order, as compared with both the rash immoderation of the Persian king and the confused chaos in which we have seen his men find themselves as a result of the sea battle.

Once again, then, Xerxes is seen as being all that the Greeks are not. This may well have extended to a specific contrast with Themistocles in the complete version of the poem; the opening line cited by Plutarch at *Philopoemen* 11.2 (= *PMG* 788), 'Fashioning for Greece the great and glorious ornament of freedom', has been thought perhaps to refer to Themistocles' role at Salamis.[33] If this were indeed the case then the image of a Greek leader of men striving for freedom would have formed a clear contrast with the picture of an eastern tyrant intent on enslavement. Whether or not Themistocles was intended as the subject of this line, however, the freedom/slavery contrast is starkly made as Xerxes is clearly seen to be a leader of a slave empire into which he also wishes to incorporate Greece.[34]

Timotheus' Xerxes, therefore, is all excess and irrationality; his hysterical lamentation, along with his tyrannical behaviour and his obsession with material wealth, allows for a flamboyant portrayal of the barbarian king. The genre may be innovative but the established images relating to Xerxes persist. Whilst the use of direct speech is unusual as far as images of Xerxes in the aftermath of Salamis are concerned this of course bears a resemblance to Aeschylus' singing Persian king. It need hardly be said that what we have here is not the authentic voice of a long-dead Persian king, but the voice which a late fifth-century Greek still chose to impose upon this ethnically other figure from the past. Xerxes' *oratio recta* is here compromised by the fact that he, like Aeschylus' Xerxes, is

[33] Bassett 1931, p. 155.
[34] On Xerxes as the antitype of the Greek leaders Themistocles and Leonidas in Herodotus' account, see above, pp. 80-4.

here seen not simply speaking, but singing (to the accompaniment of the lyre); this, along with the dramatic, mimetic aspects of the citharodic performance results in a theatrical picture of the king, substantiated largely by the same motifs which had by now been in use for around three-quarters of a century. Xerxes' ludicrous behaviour – for example, in punishing the Hellespont, or in ordering his men to destroy the Persian tents – is combined here with the terrifying ferocity of a despot in another ambiguous representation which demonstrates the Greek audience's need to remember the force with which their ancestors had reckoned, but at the same time to denigrate with mockery the perpetrator of the second Persian invasion.

An 'inside perspective': Ctesias of Cnidus

We might think that a physician who was said to have lived for a time at the Persian court and therefore had access to 'inside information' about Achaemenid history, albeit by his time over a century old, might help us to extract, if not the real Xerxes, at least a Persian perspective upon the events of his reign. Ctesias, originally from Cnidus on the coast of Asia Minor, was court physician to Artaxerxes II at the beginning of the fourth century; the story goes that he was held as a prisoner of war there for seventeen years. Having been appointed as physician to the king, he had access both to conversations with other members of the court and to Persian royal records, upon which he claimed to have based the non-contemporary parts of his history of Persia (Diodorus 2.32.4).[35]

[35] How much of the biography of Ctesias is true and how much is invention is subject to debate; it is possible that at least the claim to have had access to royal records was a fabrication designed to command authority for his work. Stevenson 1997, pp. 3-9 summarises the details of Ctesias' biography and the main points of contention. For the Ctesias testimonia see *FGrH* 688 T 1-19.

It is Ctesias' *Persica*[36] with which we are concerned here for the material which it contains concerning Xerxes, although we know that he also wrote an *Indica* and a *Periodos*. One major problem facing us is that we must always deal with the work at one remove; the original does not survive and so we are forced to rely upon citations by later authors. For information on the *Persica* our most important source is the work of the ninth-century Byzantine scholar, Photius, who has left us a summary of the last seventeen books of this work. It is perhaps stating the obvious to say that such an epitome cannot possibly reveal to us the entire content of the original, and we are left to rely on Photius' judgement as to which parts were important enough to merit inclusion in his synopsis. Once again – this time, through the accident of what history has failed to preserve – Xerxes is a remote figure, and one who remains only in fragmentary form.

As a writer of Persian history, Ctesias appears to have set himself up as competing with Herodotus; Photius describes his account from Cambyses to Xerxes as 'differing almost entirely from that of Herodotus; he often alleges that (Herodotus) is a liar and calls him an inventor of stories' (*FGrH* 688 T 8). Such agonistic criticism of their precursors is part of the rhetoric of early historiographers, seen most famously at Thucydides 1.22.4 where the writer implicitly attacks the 'romantic' approach to history by asserting that his work lacks elements of the fabulous (τὸ μυθῶδες) but that as a result it will be a 'possession for all time' (κτῆμα ἐς αἰεὶ). Perhaps it is as a result of such a desire

[36] Ctesias was not, of course, the only fourth-century historian to have written a *Persica*, but no others which mention Xerxes have survived. Deinon and Heracleides, for example, both wrote *Persica* in the fourth century; see Stevenson 1997, pp. 9-21.

to distance himself from his most well-known predecessor that Ctesias seems (if Photius' summary is accurate) to have overlooked, or treated only cursorily, much of what had been dealt with already by Herodotus. This may well be the reason why he appears to have had little to say on the subject of the Persian Wars. Drews (1973, p. 106) writes on this matter that,

> Ctesias could not dismiss the wars entirely, but his short summary is merely a woeful "correction" of Herodotus. According to Ctesias, Datis was killed at Marathon, Xerxes invaded Greece because the Athenians would not return Datis' corpse, and the battle of Salamis took place after the battle of Plataea.

If, then, Xerxes does not feature here in as much detail as we might like it may be possible to attribute this in part to the author's attempt to avoid being seen simply to cover old ground.

Ctesias' portrayal of Xerxes would still appear, however, to owe much to Herodotus and earlier Greek sources (or at least to the general pool of themes relating to the Persian king) in spite of his claims to have used Persian chronicles as a source. Many of the traditional topoi of the second Persian campaign against Greece remain in place, although, as noted by Drews, the chronology of events differs from that which is more commonly attested in other accounts. The established picture of Xerxes as the impious and arrogant invader still surfaces here, and familiar images are used once again. Here we find the vast force

mustered by the king, and the Hellespontine bridge described as a 'yoke';[37] the claim that one of Xerxes' motives for entering Greece was in revenge for the Calchedonians' attempted destruction of his father's bridge[38] is a reminder that Xerxes was imitating the actions of Darius here. So too are we reminded of Persian gold and the vast wealth of the Persian king; Ctesias' account reports the many gifts given by Xerxes to Megabyzus after his capture of Babylon. These included, strangely enough, a golden hand mill weighing six talents and said to be the most honourable of the royal gifts.[39] We are also given a customary picture of a despot who rules over slave subjects; Xerxes' troops at Thermopylae are said to have been 'whipped into battle' (εἶτα μαστιγοῦνται ἐπὶ τῷ πολεμεῖν).[40] In Ctesias' account of Thermopylae we are reminded too that the Persians are victorious not because of their skill but through the deceit of the treacherous Trachinians;[41] this of course contrasts with the steadfast and courageously honourable resistance of Leonidas and his men there.

Signs of Xerxes' impiety also abound here. The first indicator of this is perhaps the hint at the story of his encounter with the tomb of the god Belitanes in Babylon; all we are told here in the summary of Photius is that Xerxes 'was unable to fill the vessel with oil, as was written'.[42] The cursory reference suggests that this was perhaps a well known anecdote either at the time Ctesias was

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[37] *FGrH* 688 F 13.27 (23): 'Xerxes then gathered a Persian force of eight hundred thousand men, without counting the chariots, and one thousand triremes, and drove them into Greece, having yoked Abydos (ζευγνὺς τὴν Ἄβυδον).' Persian numbers are also mentioned in relation to Thermopylae, Plataea and Salamis. On Ctesias' statistics concerning Persian troops, see Bigwood 1976, pp. 10-11. She writes (p. 11) that, 'All his figures in the account of the Persian Wars are worthless.'

[38] *FGrH* 688 F 13.25 (21)

[39] *FGrH* 688 F 13.26 (22)

[40] *FGrH* 688 F 13.27 (23)

[41] *FGrH* 688 F 13.27 (24)

[42] *FGrH* 688 F 13.26 (21)

writing or when Photius summarised the work, but we must look to another source, the *Varia Historia* (13.3) of Aelian, to fill in the details. There Aelian writes that, having opened the sarcophagus of the god, the king found the body lying in olive oil and an inscription to the effect that things would turn out badly for one unable to fill up the sarcophagus with more oil. No matter how much oil Xerxes had poured in the level in the tomb never rose. The story is strikingly reminiscent of the symbolism utilised in Aeschylus' *Persae* whereby Xerxes is repeatedly seen both literally and metaphorically as wasting and emptying (see above, p. 60). It seems that the tale was perhaps mentioned here by Ctesias as a sign of Xerxes' ungodliness – his violation of the tomb of a foreign god heralded the sacrilegious disrespect which he was later to show for the shrines of Greece.

The effect which this Persian impiety had upon the Greeks too is reported with Xerxes being seen ordering Mardonius to sack the temple of Apollo at Delphi after the battle of Plataea; in a kind of divine vengeance Mardonius is said to have died at the sanctuary as a result of injuries received from a hailstorm there. We do gain a very slight glimpse of Xerxes' humanity here, however, as he is said to have been extremely upset at Mardonius' death.[43] Any sympathy which we might have soon evaporates, however, as the next event which is described is his supreme insolence in attacking and burning Athens itself, and eventually even the Acropolis.[44] Ctesias' account then claims that Xerxes attempted to cross to Salamis on foot, by way of a bank of earth constructed from Heracleum;[45] this

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[43] *FGrH* 688 F 13.29 (25)
[44] *FGrH* 688 F 13.30 (26)
[45] *FGrH* 688 F 13.30 (26). Cf. Herodotus 8.97.1, where Xerxes begins to construct a bridge of boats across to Salamis after the battle to try to fool others into thinking that he does not intend to flee. Bigwood 1978, p. 33 notes that in Ctesias' account, in contrast with Herodotus, the attempt to build this bridge takes place *before* the battle.

image mirrors on a small scale that of the initial crossing of the Hellespont and reminds us again of Xerxes' belief that he could control both land and sea.

Ultimately, of course, Xerxes' forces are defeated and we are told explicitly that he himself 'fled as a result of the skill and planning of Aristides and Themistocles (βουλῇ πάλιν καὶ τέχνῃ Ἀριστείδου καὶ Θεμιστοκλέους)'.[46] This disappearance of the king from the scene of the action is one with which we are now well acquainted and the familiar contrast between incompetent Persian and tactically brilliant Greeks is reiterated once more. Xerxes' hybris is to continue, however, in spite of his absence from the scene; he is now said, from the safety of Asia, to have instructed Megabyzus to plunder the temple at Delphi. 'When he (Megabyzus) refused, the eunuch Matacas was sent to insult Apollo and to despoil everything there (ὕβρεις τε φέρων τῷ Ἀπόλλωνι καὶ πάντα συλήσων)'.[47] The idea that Xerxes sends his underlings to do his dirty work reinforces the notion that the king is at a distance and out of reach.

In a manner heralded by Herodotus' account, Ctesias' Xerxes is both a terrifying despotic figure and one who is marginalised and perhaps even mocked as a result of his 'difference' from the Greeks. The use of a eunuch as one of his most trusted servants, seen in the story of the plundering of Delphi, is an aspect apparently stressed by Ctesias' portrayal of the Persian court and which merits closer analysis; firstly it is a part of what makes Xerxes (and other Persian kings) so very different from the Greeks, and secondly it seems to go hand in hand with the

[46] *FGrH* 688 F 13.30 (26)
[47] *FGrH* 688 F 13.31 (27)

insight into the personal affairs of the Persian kings which is offered by this author.[48] We know that eunuchs were seen by Greeks as a characteristic feature of the Persian court from an early stage after the Persian Wars, with Phrynichus' *Phoenissae* providing the earliest known example of Persian eunuchs actually seen on stage; Hall (1989, p. 157) has commented that,

> The palace eunuch of the Greeks' imagination encapsulates their systematic feminization of Asia; emotional, wily, subservient, luxurious, and emasculated, he embodies simultaneously all the various threads in the fabric of their orientalist discourse.

Alongside Ctesias' interest in the eunuchs of the Persian court, he also appears to have been keen to look at the role of the women at the Persian court; it is perhaps a part of his claim to have had access to gossip at the court of his day that he maintains this interest in the goings on behind closed doors. Again the stress on the role of the female contributes to the picture of emasculated eastern royalty which was sustained through the generations.

Historiographical interest in private affairs at the Persian court has only been glimpsed by us once before, in the closing paragraphs of Herodotus' work (9.108-113) where the earlier historian discusses the love of Xerxes for his sister-in-law, and subsequently his daughter-in-law, which ultimately resulted in disaster. Photius' summary suggests that Ctesias' presentation of Xerxes both began and ended with a study of some of the more personal aspects of the king's rule. The section on Xerxes begins with the following:

> The son [of Darius], Xerxes, was king, and Artapanus the son of Artasyras

[48] On the role of eunuchs in Ctesias' *Persica* in general, see Gera 1993, pp. 203-4.

> was as influential with him as was his father over Xerxes' father. The aged Mardonius was also influential, and Matacas was the most influential of the eunuchs. Xerxes married Amestris, the daughter of Onophas, and they had a son, Darius, and then after two years Hystaspes and Artaxerxes. They had two daughters, one called Amytis after her grandmother, and the other Rhodogune.[49]

With this opening part of the Xerxes-narrative, then, we were apparently given a picture of the king's personal relationships within his court; Ctesias seems to have felt that a knowledge of Xerxes' familial ties, as well as of those he had with his advisers, was important in building up a complete chronicle of his life. The stress on the role of advisers here, including that of one of the eunuchs at the Persian court (the text suggests that Matacas was only one of several), creates an image of Xerxes as influenced by those around him rather than as acting wholly upon his own initiative. This is reinforced later in Ctesias' account of the Persian Wars; Demaratus, for example, is said to have accompanied Xerxes initially and to have prevented him from invading Sparta.[50] Similarly, the engagement at Thermopylae is said to have been fought not by Xerxes himself but by his general Artapanus, and the battle at Plataea, in keeping with earlier tradition, by Mardonius. Again, as seen in both Aeschylus and Herodotus, Xerxes is presented as being detached from the real action of his own campaign. This may have been a result of Greek experience of how Persians really fought yet, as was the case with Herodotus, the fact that it is mentioned in the account of Ctesias reveals that it must have again been thought of as a significant aspect of the way in which Xerxes carried out his campaign.

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[49] *FGrH* 688 F 13.24 (20)
[50] *FGrH* 688 F 13.27 (23)

The mention of the women and eunuchs of Xerxes' court in the introduction to his reign also foreshadows the involvement of such figures in the intrigues which were said to have taken place at the Persian court; this influence of the feminine (or at least the less masculine), is perhaps concomitant with the perception of Xerxes' reign as a period of decline after the heyday of his father Darius.[51] It may be significant here that no mention of the women or eunuchs at court is made in what remains of Ctesias' account of Darius' reign, yet Photius' summary suggests that the historian's account of the demise of Xerxes seems to have concentrated upon the influence of both. Caution must of course be exercised here, however, as Photius' summary gives us little information on Darius' reign after the conspiracy which brought him to the throne.

Although the epitome covers only the bare details, there is enough information here to deduce that Ctesias saw the women and the eunuchs as particularly significant aspects of the Persian court at this time. The summary of his concluding remarks on Xerxes' reign, after the king's return from Greece, reads as follows:

> Xerxes had arrived in Persia from Babylon, where Megabyzus accused his wife Amytis, who was the daughter of Xerxes (as said before), of adultery. And Amytis was reprimanded by her father, and vowed that she was faithful.
>
> Artapanus, who was very influential with Xerxes, and Aspamistres the eunuch, who was also influential, plotted to destroy Xerxes, and did so; then they persuaded his son Artoxerxes that Darius, his other son, had

[51] On this view of Xerxes' reign as seen in Greek historiography and adopted by many modern scholars see Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1983, pp. 20-22.

killed him.

Darius was then brought by Artapanus to the home of Artoxerxes, and although he shouted a lot and denied that he was his father's murderer, he was also put to death.[52]

This brief synopsis conveys to us some sense of the kind of court intrigues surrounding the Persian kings in which Ctesias was interested; it gives evidence for the earliest surviving literary account of Xerxes' death, and also provides us with an insight into some of the more fabulous elements of Ctesias' history (which Thucydides would have been justified in calling τὸ μυθῶδες) which seem, with hindsight, to lean towards what we might now call the 'novelistic'. We can only speculate as to the kind of detail included concerning the two incidents – Amytis' alleged adultery, and the assassination of Xerxes – mentioned here, but the impression gleaned even from Photius is one of an atmosphere in which such affairs were able to flourish; the hint of a pernicious female presence alongside the figure of the conspiring eunuch makes for a fascinating picture and lends colour to Ctesias' portrayal of the Persian king. The double-crossing here of Artapanus, who was said, as we saw earlier, to be one of the king's chief advisers (named Artabanus in Herodotus' account), lends an even more sinister aspect to the story.

The manner of Xerxes' death, as a result of conspiracy against him, contrasts starkly with that of his father Darius who was said in Ctesias' account to have died simply after a long illness, at the age of seventy-two.[53] The plot against the monarch is perhaps also presented here as one of the symptoms of the supposed

[52] *FGrH* 688 F 13.32-33 (28-29)
[53] *FGrH* 688 F 13.23 (19)

decline in Persia thought to have begun during Xerxes' rule. Once more the figure of Xerxes as formidable despot is set alongside another equally negative image, but this time one which makes the Persian king appear to be worthy only of scorn; he is weak, subject to the influence of others – including, of course the power of the feminine – and ultimately overthrown by a plot which takes his life.

It must of course be borne in mind that, no matter how much of an inside perspective Ctesias may have had (or at least claimed to have had!) on the Persian court and its history, he was still ultimately perceiving events through Greek eyes. Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1987 (a), p. 37) writes of his work that, 'Ctesias' upbringing as a Greek had taught him a certain way to look at Persian affairs and to interpret it along the lines his cultural background had learnt (*sic*) him to do. In other words, he was seeing what he was taught to see, as, later on, he was to tell what he was expected to tell.' In the case of this particular work, the image of Xerxes has been filtered twice before reaching us – first through the thoroughly Greek lens of the original author and then once more by Photius' selection of material. The perception of the king which remains, however, is nonetheless testament to the striking stability of the Xerxes-image in all genres of Greek literature which have survived from the fourth century.

Fourth-century Athens: revisiting the glorious past

Within the body of extant Athenian literature from the fourth century the Persian Wars are still a pervasive presence, no doubt as a result, at least in part, of the presence of Persia as a player on the Greek political stage from the late fifth

century on. Xerxes himself, however, continues to be elusive; it is not possible to find any one Athenian source from this era which deals in any detail with the Persian king, and there is nothing which refers to him in a continuous piece of narrative, even to the limited extent of the works of Timotheus and Ctesias. The nature of the material means that brief references to him are scattered across a wide range of texts written by the Attic orators as well as by Plato and Aristotle.

One Athenian writer who dealt extensively with Persian affairs in this period is worthy of mention here, although he pays no attention to the figure of Xerxes. Xenophon provides us with a perspective which suggests an alternative to the view that Persians were universally reviled. His unique position as a mercenary for Cyrus II does in a sense, in spite of his Athenian origin, locate him outside the Athenian tradition, but his work nonetheless suggests the possibility that sentiment favourable to Persia could surface, given the right conditions; Xenophon's personal experience of Persians led him to make Persia a prominent topic in several of his works. Hirsch's 1985 *The Friendship of the Barbarians* discusses what he sees as Xenophon's favourable attitude to Persia, suggesting that his works give us reason to doubt that the negative image of Persia was shared by the majority of fourth-century Greeks (p. 3).

Significantly, however, even within this corpus of work which is less damning of Persia than the majority of extant Greek sources, there is no room for Xerxes and no attempt to rehabilitate the Persian tyrant. Xenophon did, however, see fit to choose an eastern monarch for his work upon 'the life and career of one human being who, although belonging to the past, is meant to be a paradigm for

Xenophon's contemporaries' (Due 1989, p. 25); Cyrus the Great is held up in the *Cyropaedia* as an example of the ideal ruler and displays the moral qualities seen to be important in this capacity. The work illustrates on a grand scale that it was indeed possible for a barbarian to be seen as a paradigm of moral integrity and political sense; the complimentary portrayal of Cyrus provides a striking antithesis to the universally negative representation of Xerxes in Greek literature of this period. Within the *Cyropaedia* Gera has noted too (1993, pp. 280-2) that the figure of Cyrus is virtually omnipresent; he participates in the majority of the work's dialogues and is the chief initiator of strategies and decision-making. She notes (p. 282):

> In virtually all of the conversations in the *Cyropaedia* in which plans are formulated there is only one 'correct' view, that expressed by Cyrus. Even if others do make proposals or suggestions of their own, very little space is allocated to the presentation of their ideas, which are then turned down by the Persian leader.

The contrast with the presentation of Xerxes in the narratives examined so far could not be starker; as noted in relation to Herodotus' account in particular, Xerxes is frequently seen as marginal to the main narrative, and subject to the influence of others, rather than as having a personal impact on the events in which he participates.

The Persian Wars in general were by the fourth century a rhetorical commonplace in literature written at Athens, forming in particular a significant part of the catalogue of Athenian exploits, both mythical and historical, which is one of the key elements of the *epitaphios* or funeral oration; the wars feature as

an example of one of Athens' victorious struggles against barbarian outsiders, alongside the defeat of the Amazons and Eurystheus. The appeal to the Athenians' πρόγονοι is part of the orators' means of persuading the Athenians of the present to become as virtuous as the men of the past. The Persian Wars had come to form the historical precedent for such commendable behaviour;[54] the idea that the past was more glorious than the present is already familiar to us from Aristophanic comedy. Within this tradition was an inevitable stress on the elements where Athens could boast the supreme contribution to Greek success. The result was an emphasis upon Marathon, which could be portrayed as having been fought by the Athenians alone, at the expense of later battles.[55] As Thomas (1989, p. 226) writes, 'Marathon came to epitomize Athenian success in the Persian Wars. It expressed the triumph of Athens' chauvinistic version of history, which least of all celebrated the battle of Plateia, so obviously a communal effort with the other Greeks.'[56] Salamis too suffered in this fourth century 'battle of the battles'; the concentration upon the earlier victory over Darius is one reason why Xerxes features only cursorily in the oratory of the fourth century.

The writers of Athens during this period display in their work an awareness that the theme of Athenian resistance to Persia was by now something of a cliché. Lycurgus, for example, warns against the inappropriate use of examples from the

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[54] See also Habicht (1961), who explores a series of false inscriptions purporting to be from the era of the Persian Wars but actually created in the mid- fourth century; these, he asserts, appealed to patriotic, nationalist sentiments, and were used as part of the argument for Athenian resistance to Macedon.

[55] The claim that Marathon was fought by the Athenians alone can be seen also in Thucydides; the speaker at 1.73.4 claims that the Athenians alone (μόνοι, 73.4) braved battle against the barbarian at Marathon; this is a rhetorical claim, and inaccurate, although not unusual. Herodotus' account of Marathon stresses the role of the Plataeans there (6.108.1, 111.2-3, 113.1), yet later in his work too the Athenians claim to have stood alone at Marathon (9.27.5).

[56] On the significance of Marathon in the *epitaphios*, see also Loraux 1986, pp. 155-171.

past; in his speech *Against Leocrates* (68-9) he points out that Leocrates' cowardly actions in fleeing from Athens after the defeat at Chaeronea cannot possibly be compared with those of the honourable ancestors who fled to Salamis during the war with Xerxes. Elsewhere we find Aristotle using Xerxes as one of several examples in his *Rhetoric* (1393b). When talking about the use of historical and mythical examples he writes that a typical historical example might be:

> if one were to say that it is necessary to make preparations against the Great King and not to allow him to subdue Egypt; for Darius did not cross over to Greece until he had obtained possession of Egypt; but as soon as he had done so, he did. Again, Xerxes did not attack us until he had obtained possession of that country, but when he had, he crossed over; consequently, if the present Great King does the same, he will cross over – so it must not be allowed.

In this case reference to Xerxes is important for the example to function; it is worth noting, however, that the particular events which are referred to lend weight to the image of Xerxes as merely imitating the actions of his father rather than as having an identity in his own right.

Nowhere is the acknowledgement of the overuse of the Persian Wars tradition more apparent than in Plato's *Menexenus* where the philosopher presents to his audience, as reported by Socrates and supposedly from the mouth of Aspasia, a funeral oration which is a parody of the characteristics of such speeches.[57] All of

[57] Loraux 1986, p. 311 sees the *Menexenus* as an attack on 'Athenian narcissism' and in this respect comparable to the comedies of Aristophanes in which Athenian self-glorification concerning the Persian Wars is mocked.

the tendencies of the *epitaphios* – and not least the excessive praise of the past – are taken to the extreme here. Where the Persian Wars are concerned this speech satirises the tendency to distort history and to present Marathon as the most significant of the battles; this is explicitly stated at 240e-241a, where Plato asserts that second place goes to those who fought at sea at Salamis and Artemisium. As a result, although Darius is named and credited as the active party in the first Persian invasion of Greece,[58] Xerxes is completely sidelined. He is never named and barely alluded to; Salamis and Artemisium are mentioned without so much as a passing reference to the king who was responsible. We find generic references to 'the barbarian(s)'[59] in this context, but no mention whatsoever of their leader.

This omission of the Persian king from accounts of his invasion of Greece also often occurs in 'genuine' rhetorical treatments of the subject. Demosthenes' *Funeral Oration* (10) succeeds in referring to the Persian Wars without mentioning either of the Persian kings responsible, referring only to 'the expedition from the whole of Asia', and, in like manner, Hyperides' *epitaphios* can discuss the recent defence of Thermopylae by Leosthenes and remind his audience that this was history repeating itself, whilst completely effacing Xerxes.[60] Elsewhere, the king is merely mentioned in passing, without being given any treatment beyond the mention of his name. In many cases where Xerxes' name does appear this is as a means of locating certain events in time. Isocrates can refer in passing in his *Panegyricus* (71) to the deeds of 'those who

[58] *Menexenus* 239e, 240a.
[59] 241c, 241d.
[60] Hyperides, *Funeral Oration* 12: 'From there he came to Pylae [Thermopylae] and occupied the pass through which, in the past as well, the barbarians had marched against the Greeks.'

fought against Darius and Xerxes'. Similarly, in the speech *Against Neaera* (found in the Demosthenic corpus but attributed to Apollodorus) the speaker talks of Plataean support for Athens 'when Xerxes came against Greece' (95), and Lycurgus' *Against Leocrates* (80), when discussing the question of loyalty to the state, refers to the oaths taken at Plataea by the Greeks 'before taking up their posts to fight against the power of Xerxes'. We might compare here too the reference in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Athenaion Politeia* (22.8) to the recall of exiles during the archonship of Hypsechides, 'because of the expedition of Xerxes'. Such passing allusions demonstrate that the story of resistance to Persia was thought to be so well-known that elaboration was unnecessary; they do little to help us in our search for the Persian king, however, as he continues to be only a background figure rather than a key player.

In cases where the actions of Xerxes are expanded upon to any extent, however, the familiar symbols do reappear. Lysias' *Funeral Oration* is a good example of such rhetorical treatment. In relation to the expedition of 480/479 BC, the orator goes into some degree of detail (27-9):

> After this [Marathon], Xerxes, the king of Asia, who had disdained the Greeks, but had been deceived in his hope, and was dishonoured by what had happened [the Persian defeat], was aggrieved by the disaster, and enraged against those responsible; he was unused to disaster and unacquainted with honourable men. In ten years' time he prepared for war and came with twelve hundred ships; and the number of the land army that he brought was so immeasurable that to detail even the nations that followed him would be a lengthy task. But this is the best evidence of their

> numbers: although he had a thousand ships for taking his land army over the narrowest part of the Hellespont from Asia to Europe he did not want to do so, thinking it would be a great waste of time for him. So, despising the principles of nature, the ways of heaven and the ideas of men, he made a road across the sea and forced a passage for ships through the land. When he yoked the Hellespont and dug through Athos no-one stood in his way, for the unwilling submitted and the willing were traitors.

The emphasis here is almost entirely upon the extreme arrogance of Xerxes, and consequently motifs are employed which can best be used to support this image. First we are given an insight into Xerxes' perceived motives for launching a second expedition against Greece; he is seen as being angered and insulted by the failure of his father's campaign, and as seeking vengeance, a motive which is alluded to in Herodotus' account (7.5.1-2). There it is expressed not by Xerxes but by his adviser Mardonius; by removing any allusion to outside influence here Lysias' version of events paints Xerxes as an even darker villain. By describing Xerxes as 'unacquainted with honourable (or brave)[61] men' (ἄπειρος ἀνδρῶν ἀγαθῶν) the orator makes him the exact opposite of the virtuous Greeks against whom he marched. The references which follow, to the immeasurable numbers of the Persian force, are, as already seen in earlier texts, typical of accounts which stress the king's immoderation; here too they serve to highlight the Greeks' incredible triumph in overcoming such a vast force.

The image which dominates here, however, is that of the crossing of the Hellespont, although the motive which is given is one not seen before; Xerxes

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[61] ἀγαθός has a range of meanings (see LSJ), but when used in relation to persons often implies a positive moral judgement.

thinks that to sail his men across in ships would be a waste of time for him.[62] This reinforces the notion that Xerxes is a man of supreme arrogance who has the power and money to indulge his every whim; here this results in the creation of the Hellespont bridge and the digging of the Athos canal. Once more the crossing into Greece is described using the well-established vocabulary surrounding the story, as a 'yoking' (ζεύξας μὲν τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον), a reminder, as usual, of the king's ultimate mission to enslave Greece. It is worth noting too that, where Herodotus (7.22-23) describes the actual digging of the Athos canal at the isthmus, Lysias' condensed version implies that Xerxes dug through the very mountain itself (διορύξας δὲ τὸν Ἄθω); this obscuring of the details makes the feat seem like even more of excessive undertaking and as such it foreshadows many of the later accounts of the progress of Xerxes.[63]

These symbols of Xerxes' impiety are crucial in a speech which is intent upon emphasising the role of the Athenians as champions of piety and justice, and the idea that they were victorious against Persia because they had right on their side. In this small section of the speech Xerxes is presented as being all that the Athenians are not. Lysias goes on to assert that, when other Greeks deserted, the Athenians rushed to Artemisium to fight the Persians there, whilst the Spartans did the same at Thermopylae. Although Sparta is praised here for her bravery, Lysias takes the chance to remind us that of course the Athenians were victorious, but the Spartans were crushed (30-31). Salamis too provides an opportunity to exalt the Athenians for their role in defeating Persia, yet even in

[62] The sentiment is one later attributed to Caligula in relation to his bridge at Baiae. See below, p. 202.
[63] Diodorus 11.2.4 is rare in that he does state that the canal was constructed at the neck of the Chersonese.

the unusually extended account of the battle given here (33-43) there is no place, it seems, for any reference to Xerxes. He is not even reduced to the status of observer as in various other Salamis-narratives, but is removed from the picture completely. This allows the orator to concentrate wholly upon the valiant deeds of the Athenians. Represented as the complete antitype of their Persian opponents, they are fighters for freedom (33, 34, 42) against the barbarian hordes (36, 37, 40); these allusions are enough to remind us of what Xerxes, as their enemy, stands for. As in other examples of the Salamis story, Themistocles too is there as a foil to Xerxes – he is described as a general 'most competent to speak and decide and act' (42). By comparison, Lysias' audience would know with hindsight that ultimately Xerxes proved to be incompetent in all three of these areas!

Isocrates too utilises several of the repertoire of established symbols in order to represent his Xerxes. In his *Panegyricus*, a speech which advocated in 380 BC that the Greeks should unite for a new campaign against Persia, he also feels the need to extol the virtues of the Athenians; as Gillis (1971, p. 56) points out, although the piece allegedly sets out to advocate a dual hegemony between Athens and Sparta, in fact the text shows that Isocrates aims to promote Athenian leadership. Unsurprisingly, then, the emphasis is again upon Athens' own contribution to the well-being of Greece in the past in support of this claim to renewed hegemony. Isocrates' version of Xerxes' expedition in this speech reads as follows (88-9):

> After this [the Marathon campaign] came the later expedition which was led by Xerxes himself; he had left his palace, boldly set himself up as

> general, and gathered all of the men of Asia. Who, although eager to exaggerate in speaking about this, has not said less than the truth? [Xerxes] reached such a level of haughtiness that, thinking it a small task to subdue Hellas, he planned to leave a memento fit for a superhuman and did not stop until he had devised and carried out that thing which everyone still talks about; so that he could sail his troops through the land and march across the sea he yoked the Hellespont and dug through Athos (ὥστε τῷ στρατοπέδῳ πλεῦσαι μὲν διὰ τῆς ἠπείρου, πεζεῦσαι δὲ διὰ τῆς θαλάττης, τὸν μὲν Ἑλλήσποντον ζεύξας, τὸν δ' Ἄθω διορύξας).

As in Lysias' funeral oration Isocrates stresses the extreme arrogance of Xerxes, and uses the same motifs to illustrate it. Emphasis is again placed upon Xerxes as the instigator of the action as this helps to enhance the image of the conceited invader. It is noteworthy that here he is, unusually for such accounts, described explicitly as leading the troops in person; we are told that he 'boldly set himself up as general' (στρατηγὸς δὲ καταστῆναι τολμήσας). Again, the number of his troops is commented upon (ἅπαντας δὲ τοὺς ἐκ τῆς Ἀσίας συναγείρας),[64] and Isocrates then takes an almost Homeric line by asserting that it is impossible to express in full the excesses of Xerxes.

The crowning topos here, as with Lysias, is of course the Hellespont/Athos pairing, with the implication here that Xerxes perceived himself as a god – we are told that he wanted to leave a memento that was more than human

[64] In the *Panathenaicus*, the last speech of his career, and an even more unabashed exaltation of the Athenians, Isocrates gives specific details concerning the number of Xerxes' troops; there he says that the king had gathered thirteen hundred triremes and a land force totalling five million, including seven hundred thousand fighting men (*Panathenaicus* 49), with which he marched against Greece.

(βουληθεὶς δὲ τοιοῦτον μνημεῖον καταλιπεῖν ὃ μὴ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεώς ἐστιν). It is ironic, then, that although Xerxes was the one who desired to leave such a reminder of himself it is he who has suffered *damnatio memoriae* in the traditions; ultimately the Greeks against whom he fought, and lost, have been memorialised instead. In Isocrates' narrative of Salamis in the same speech, for example (*Panegyricus* 93-8), no mention of Xerxes himself is made, although we do find further reference to the number of his ships (93, 97).

There are some very good reasons for the selection of these particular topoi by the writers of the fourth century. If we consider their political agenda it is easy to discern why their stress is wholly upon the arrogance and excess of Xerxes. We might note that here there is no trace of the cowardly Xerxes who literally runs away from the scene of the battle in the works of Aeschylus, Herodotus and others; nor do we find the Xerxes who has little input as to the course of events, but whose actions are heavily influenced by others. Instead when Xerxes does appear, all of the emphasis is placed upon the incidents which display the king's arrogance and confidence in his own might. This is not surprising when we consider that the purpose of these speeches was to extol the virtues of the Athenians to the highest level; it would be inappropriate in this context to portray their enemy as the coward who deserted his troops when the going got tough. Instead he *must* be seen as the formidable leader of a vast fighting force, whose arrogance is too great even to describe in full.

Isocrates' *Panegyricus* needs to be able to urge the present-day Athenians to consider what their ancestors achieved, against all the odds, in order to persuade

them that a renewed campaign against Persia is at least a possibility. The orator actually comments, during his Salamis-narrative, that 'my task is to speak of those matters which are distinctive (i.e. to the Athenians) and give claim to leadership, and which confirm the arguments which I have already advanced' (*Panegyricus* 98). Similarly, the funeral orations are designed to present a picture of long-standing traditions of the Athenians' valour. Only if they show the ancestors as having fought against a formidable enemy can the *epitaphioi* fulfil this function; it would be distinctly unhelpful here to make reference to any notion of Xerxes as not participating directly in the battle, or as fleeing at the first signs of defeat. Xerxes needs to be seen as the exact opposite of all that the Athenians stand for; hence the references to his excessive and hybristic behaviour and the stress on his association with the enslavement of Greece itself. This might well explain the complete absence of the Persian king from some of the accounts, for example those which relate to Salamis and Plataea; if the traditions do not allow for the portrayal of a fierce and supremely arrogant Xerxes, he is simply overlooked altogether in order to avoid hinting at any of the details. Instead, all of the stress is placed upon the valiant deeds of the Athenians, and their opponent, as an individual, is all but forgotten.

In some of the writing from fourth-century Athens we also see a (perhaps unconscious) denial of Xerxes' individuality. For the first time a kind of 'blending' can be seen to take place, where the Persian kings in general become assimilated to one another rather than each being credited with their own actions. A good example of this phenomenon appears in Aeschines' speech *Against*

Ctesiphon. In speaking of opposition to Persia Aeschines refers to unexpected reversals which have occurred. He asks (132),

> Is not the king of the Persians – he who dug through Athos, and yoked the Hellespont, he who demanded earth and water from the Greeks, and who dared to write in his letters that he was master of all men from sunrise until sunset – is he not struggling now not for lordship over others, but already for his life?

This speech was delivered in 330 BC, long after Xerxes, the real performer of the deeds to which Aeschines refers, was dead; still, however, the orator feels able to assimilate the traditions of Xerxes' invasion of Greece to the reign of the present Persian king, Darius III. In this way Xerxes' crimes against Greece are conveniently appropriated as the inheritance of every subsequent king of Persia.

We might compare here an example from Isocrates' *Panathenaicus* in which the orator condemns the reversal of Athenian policy in the fourth century; here (157), he complains that,

> they [the Athenians] contended with the utmost bravery against the power of [Xerxes], but, having done this, although they ought to have adopted sound measures for the tasks which followed, they came to such madness, not folly, that, although they could easily have conquered him on both land and sea, they drew up a peace for all time, as though he had been a benefactor, with the man who had marched against them and who had planned to annihilate both cities utterly, and to enslave the rest of the Hellenes.

The reference made here relates to the peace made with Persia in 387/6 BC, and known as the King's Peace, or Peace of Antalcidas; once again, however, the current Persian king is associated directly with the deeds perpetrated by Xerxes. A similar rhetorical example appears in Demosthenes' *On the Symmories*, delivered in 354 BC, in which he advises against a rash declaration of war against Persia but suggests that the Greeks should wait for the Persian king to launch an offensive. Hopefully, Demosthenes says, such an occurrence will be avoided, however, not least because (29),

> He [the Persian king] knows that with two hundred triremes, of which we provided one hundred, our ancestors destroyed a thousand of his ships, and he will hear that we now have three hundred of our own ready; so that even if he were completely mad, he would hardly think it a light thing to incur the hostility of our city.

Although Demosthenes clearly refers in this passage to 'our ancestors' (τοὺς προγόνους), the ships which they are said to have destroyed are not those of Xerxes but those of the present Persian king; again we see the story of Xerxes' failure to defeat the Greeks being projected through the generations to apply to one of his successors.

Elsewhere, in the philosophical writing from the fourth century which survives, Xerxes appears simply as a generic Persian king with no clear identity of his own. Plato, for example, can list him simply as one of many tyrants, without individual definition; in the *Republic*, on referring to the saying that it is just to benefit one's friends and harm one's enemies, Socrates comments that he does not know to whom the adage is attributed. He says, 'I think it was the saying of

Periander or Perdiccas or Xerxes or Ismenias the Theban or some other rich man who had great power' (336a). The implication is that it makes no difference to which of these men the saying is attributed; Xerxes is thus given no individual identity. Similarly, Aristotle's *On the Cosmos* uses Xerxes simply as a non-specific example of a Persian king. The philosopher discusses the detachment of divine powers from their earthly subjects and compares this to the distance of a Persian king from his people (398a). He goes on to give a generic picture of how a Greek of his time must have perceived the Persian kings' lifestyle, describing the royal residence and the use of officials to oversee the various aspects of imperial administration. He concludes (398b):

> We must suppose that the majesty of the Great King falls short of the majesty of the god who rules the cosmos by as much as the difference between the king and the poorest and weakest living creature so that, if it was undignified for Xerxes to appear himself to do his own work, to fulfil his wishes himself and to conduct his affairs, it would be much more unfitting for the god.

It seems that Aristotle's interest in political theory has led him to offer here an insight into the constitutional aspect of Persian rule as a model for his discussion of the gods. We are given the impression here that the name of any familiar Persian king would suffice for the example to function as Aristotle wishes; Xerxes is in no way presented as being unique or possessing any distinctive qualities which make him particularly appropriate for the comparison. Such examples demonstrate that Xerxes' name was well enough known that it could be used without specific details of his reign, or even of the Persian Wars in general, simply to evoke images of Persian kingship in any period of time.

As we saw earlier, in cases where Xerxes is individualised by the *orators* it is as an extreme example of overweening pride. Where philosophy is concerned, Plato, in relation to the ethics of tyranny, has his own take on the king as an individual, one which can in a sense be related back to the *Persae* of Aeschylus and which has informed historians' perceptions of the Persian Empire until the present day. In the third book of the *Laws* Plato expounds his theories about the decline of the empire based on the principle that after a good ruler follows the reign of a bad one. This, we are told, manifested itself under Cyrus and his sons, Smerdis and Cambyses (*Laws* 694c-695b). Cyrus is seen as a good and patriotic commander, but one without the right education and who paid no attention to household management; as a result, his sons were brought up by the women and eunuchs of the household and were indulged in their every whim, without being given any training in statesmanship. As a result, Plato asserts, their ill-discipline led to political intrigue and stupidity when they took over the kingdom from their father. Likewise, the story goes, Darius was a fine ruler, who was neither the son of a king nor reared luxuriously (*Laws* 695c); his fair policies meant that he secured the friendship of all classes of Persians as well as the loyalty of the army. By contrast, however, we are told at *Laws* 695d-e that,

> after Darius came Xerxes, who was again reared in the luxurious upbringing of royalty. "Oh Darius" – for perhaps it is thus right to address him – "how is it that you did not learn from Cyrus' error, and reared Xerxes in the same ways in which Cyrus reared Cambyses?" He [Xerxes], being the product of the same training, ended by repeating almost exactly the same misfortunes of Cambyses. Since then there has never been a Persian

king who was really 'Great', other than in name.

Once more Xerxes is associated with the excessive luxury of the Persian court; it is this which is thought by Plato to have produced the evil ruler.

Later in the dialogue (697c-698a) the decline of the Persian empire is discussed in relation to excessive despotism and tyrannical power at the expense of the freedom of the masses; in such circumstances, we are told, although kings may have vast armies, the loyalty of these is not ensured. Whilst Xerxes' name is no longer mentioned we cannot fail to recognise that it is he whom Plato has in mind here; the ensuing discussion of the Athenian resistance to the Persian invasion refers to Xerxes in clear contrast to his father, as 'young and impetuous' (νέος δὲ καὶ σφοδρὸς, *Laws* 698e).[65] This is again symbolised by reference to his crossing of the Hellespont, the canal through Athos and the vast number of Persian forces (699a). Here the link has been made between Xerxes' invasion of Greece and the decline of the Persian empire, with both seen as the products of his indulgent upbringing. This view of the reign of Xerxes as the beginning of the downward spiral for the Persian kingdom has fuelled the opinion of many a historian down to the present day; it is this Hellenocentric viewpoint which has led even Iranologists to seek – and therefore, in many cases, to find – evidence in the scant Persian sources to sustain the impression of a period of decline.[66]

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[65] Aeschylus' *Persae* too refers to the youthfulness of Xerxes – see *Persae* 13.

[66] Aristotle also alludes to the downfall of Xerxes and appears to see this as part of the general decline in Xerxes' reign; at *Politics* 1311b he discusses the conspiracy of Artapanes against the king and attributes this to the conspirator's fear of Xerxes' wrath. The story seems to suggest that Artapanes had hanged Darius under orders from Xerxes; but as the instruction was given when Xerxes was at dinner (and therefore drunk?) he feared that the king would forget that he had given this order and subsequently vent his anger. Artapanes therefore took the pre-emptive measure of conspiring against the king. The implication here seems to be that Xerxes' reign of terror was ultimately responsible for his own demise.

In the writings of fourth-century Athens we are therefore confronted with two distinct, but interrelated, approaches to Xerxes. He can, on the one hand, be used as a symbol of excessive eastern despotism and hybris (as supported by many of the standard topoi relating to this image), representing the force of evil destroyed by Athens, a force still seen by some to live on in the Persian kingdom of their own time; in this respect the king can either be individualised or, as is the case in some of the philosophical works, presented simply as a generic example of the malignant side of Persian imperialism. Alternatively he can be ignored completely where tradition does not necessarily allow for a presentation of the all-powerful, terrifying despot. Here, then, we see a subtle shift from the Xerxes of sources originating from outside Athens; where a Ctesias or a Herodotus might draw on the aspects of his character which might produce a scornful response – signs of weakness or effeminacy, for example – this most certainly does not fit in with the Athenian agenda in which praise of the ancestors for their glorious achievement is all important. Were Xerxes to be portrayed by the orators and thinkers of fourth-century Athens as weak or ridiculous, this would surely only detract from the glorious victory of those who fought against him.

Scattered sources, stable images

In spite of the chronologically and geographically disparate nature of the sources investigated in this chapter, their wide generic differences and their sometimes fragmentary state, the negative presentation of Xerxes found throughout remains strikingly stable. A range of different Xerxes-types has emerged in the course of the discussion; Timotheus' *Persae*, for example, presents a Persian king with a

baroque, theatrical quality, in keeping with the requirements of the genre. Meanwhile, Ctesias' Xerxes foreshadows what we now think of as the 'novelistic' approach, with Xerxes surrounded by palace intrigue, and the women and eunuchs at his court playing a prominent role. The writers of Athens in the fourth century, however, take what might be seen as a more straightforward line in their approach to Xerxes with the king's tyrannical side unalloyed with any hints of weakness. Many of the motifs and symbols used to represent Xerxes have remained constant and are those found in the very earliest Greek representations already discussed. For example, repeated to the point of monotony are the topoi relating to the king's vast army, his crossing of the Hellespont and canal through Athos; these are combined with selected anecdotes relating to his violence, his immorality, or his eastern effeminacy and luxury, as appropriate to the genre – and, if appropriate, the political agenda of the author – in which he appears. Still, however, a bipolar approach to Xerxes persists; he is both the domineering and terrifying despot, to be feared, and the insignificant (or simply absent) eastern weakling, to be mocked, at one and the same time. This ambiguous outlook is perhaps best explained as an attempt to deal with the fear inspired by Persia; mocking and belittling the object of anxiety thus becomes a means of confronting that fear.

CHAPTER FIVE

Foe or Friend? Alternative Views on the Xerxes-Tradition

After the fourth century Xerxes virtually disappears from view for around two hundred years in extant Greek literature of the Hellenistic period. We can only speculate as to whether the king may have featured in dramatic works after the fifth century. We know, for example, of a third-century tragedy bearing the title *Themistocles*, by Moschion. Only a fragment of this survives, apparently describing a battle,[1] and nothing else is known of the play. Another Hellenistic tragedy, by Philicus, was also entitled *Themistocles*, but there is no way of knowing whether Xerxes featured in either of these plays, and, if so, how he was portrayed. An *Exagoge* by the Jewish tragedian Ezekiel, who probably lived in Alexandria in the second century BC, was written in classical Greek and dealt with the escape of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt.[2] Jacobson (1983, pp. 24-8, and p. 185 n. 7) has noted the parallels between Aeschylus' *Persae* and this play as well as other Aeschylean influences; he comments that, 'In the story told in Aeschylus' *Persae* [Ezekiel] saw the Hellenic counterpart to the Jews' victory over the Egyptians. In each case the small, seemingly helpless people overcomes the awesome and hybristic enemy with divine aid. For each victorious people the event in a sense marks its birth as a nation.'

Other motifs found in the *Exagoge*, Jacobson suggests, were also influenced by Herodotus' presentation of Xerxes. For example, in Ezekiel's work we find

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[1] *TrGF* 97 F1

[2] *TrGF* 1² 288-301. Jacobson 1983, pp. 50-67, gives a full text and translation of the two hundred and sixty-nine lines which have been preserved.

Moses seated upon a throne on a mountain top, counting the stars as they pass before him in review; this might well call to mind the Herodotean Xerxes seated on his throne and counting his troops (Jacobson pp. 96-7). Of course the Biblical hero is the antithesis of the sacrilegious Persian king; this is later pointed up by the crossing of the Red Sea which bears resemblances to the Persian crossing of the Hellespont although, as Jacobson (p. 138) points out, the Hellespont crossing was 'an event that in its spirit was antipathetic to and irreconcilable with the Biblical miracle.' Whilst Moses performed the miracle only with the help of God, Xerxes himself hybristically took on the role of divinity; where Moses struck the sea with the staff of God, Xerxes had the Hellespont whipped and branded.[3] The allusions to the Xerxes of Greek literature here serve to highlight the contrast with Moses' supreme respect for God.

In other extant texts from this period the allusions to Xerxes which survive are very brief; not all give even the king's name. Callimachus' fragmentary *Aetia* (composed in the third century BC), for example, alludes to the passage through Mount Athos; in the so-called *Lock of Berenice* the shorn lock of hair addresses the reader, saying, 'through the middle of Athos the destructive ships of the Medes sailed (διὰ μέσσου Μηδείων ὁλοαὶ νῆες ἔβησαν Ἄθω). What can we, locks of hair, do, when such mountains yield to iron?' (*Aetia* 120.45-48) Here it suits Callimachus' literary purpose to take up the image of Xerxes as sailing through the middle of the mountain itself rather than through the isthmus where the canal was actually cut. Elsewhere, the poetic *Alexandra* attributed to

[3] Jacobson 1983, p. 139, also notes the verbal parallels between Herodotus' account of the Hellespont crossing and Ezekiel's description of the crossing of the Red Sea.

Lycophron[4] contains a 'prophecy' by Cassandra of the struggles between Europe and Asia, and there alludes to Xerxes' invasion of Greece; Cassandra prophesies that 'the mother of Epimetheus (that is, Asia) shall not yield, but in return for all shall send a single giant of the seed of Perseus, who shall walk over the sea on foot and sail over the earth, smiting the land with the oar' (1412-1416).[5] Such throwaway references confirm that the traditions relating to the Persian king were still alive during the Hellenistic period, although they yield little else which contributes to our understanding of the reception of these traditions.

Polybius and Persia

Later, only the historian Polybius makes mention of the Persian king in the second century BC, and again the references are fleeting. Polybius does, however, use the Persian invasion of Greece as a point of comparison for later history although the figure of Xerxes is not always explicitly mentioned. His history begins, for example, with a comparison of Rome with the most famous empires of the past, beginning with the Persian Empire; the aim is to show that the Roman empire has been more stable and enduring than any other in the past. There, Polybius writes (1.2.2), 'The Persians for a certain period possessed a great rule and power; but as often as they dared to transgress the boundaries of Asia they risked not only the security of the empire but also their own existence.' Later, having narrated the Roman defeat of the Gauls in the 220s BC, Polybius

[4] The author's identity is subject to controversy, but the *Alexandra* is thought to have been written in the aftermath of Flamininus' victory over Philip V of Macedon at Cynoscephalae in 197/6 BC.
[5] The Lycophron reference insinuates a parallel between the Trojan and Persian Wars; this is a device which is found elsewhere, most notably in Athenian fourth-century funerary oratory, which traditionally includes the two wars as part of the catalogue of Athens' glorious exploits.

turns immediately to past situations where the Greeks successfully resisted barbarians (2.35.7-8). Two examples are given: the Persian invasion, and the Greek resistance to the Gauls who attacked Delphi (279 BC). Polybius writes that those who have recorded these events have contributed to the Hellenes' struggle for liberty by inspiring them with stories of how Greek courage and tactics defeated these myriads in the past.[6] Millar (1987, p. 7) has noted that the Persian invasion of Greece was the real historical starting point for Polybius: 'From that point Polybius' use of earlier history embodies an awareness of a continuous and still relevant story, all of which was of importance for the present.' The invasion of Xerxes thus seems to have been viewed consciously by Polybius as we might now describe it – as precipitating the birth of the Greek nation.

Significantly the crossing of Xerxes into Greece is also used by this writer as a means of relative dating, as a point of reference which should be familiar to his Greek audience.[7] Polybius comments, for example, that the first treaty between Rome and Carthage took place twenty-eight years before this event (3.22.1-2). Later, Polybius again uses the crossing as a convenient date for the orientation of his Greek readers. At 6.11.1, he appears to say[8] that the Roman constitution consistently improved from the time of Xerxes' crossing. Clarke (1999, p. 99) has noted that the crossing of Xerxes, although not always explicitly mentioned, is a

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[6] At 38.2, in his recollection of the major incidents in Greek history prior to the defeat of the Achaean League by Rome (147-6 BC), Polybius also starts with the Persian invasion of Greece; the 'crossing of Xerxes to Europe' (τὴν Ξέρξου διάβασιν εἰς τὴν Εὐρώπην) is said to be the greatest terror inflicted upon Greece in the past.

[7] On the application of Greek history to Roman history by Polybius as a means of dating, see Millar 1987, pp. 12-13. Significant events in Greek history of the fourth and third centuries BC are also used as points of reference.

[8] The text here is corrupt; see Walbank 1957 *ad loc.*

recurrent theme in Polybius' history as other characters threaten or play out similar invasions. The crossing of natural boundaries is often significant in such attempts at conquest; she suggests (pp. 99-100) that this motif is best exemplified by the activities of Hannibal, who crosses the Rhône in order to conquer his enemies (3.44.1-2) and who is later seen crossing the Po using, like Xerxes, a bridge of boats (3.66.5-6).[9]

Elsewhere, Xerxes is mentioned in passing too in the speech of the Acarnanian envoy to Sparta in 210 BC. After the Romans had allied with the Aetolian League in 212/11 BC, ambassadors from Acarnania (allied with Philip V of Macedon, against Rome and Aetolia) and from Aetolia had been sent to Sparta in the hope of winning her support. The Acarnanian envoy, urging Sparta to ally with the Achaeans and Macedonians against Roman aggression, reminds the Spartans of their ancestors' struggle for the freedom of the Greeks (9.38.2-4):

> Why do you think it was, men of Lacedaemon, that your ancestors, at the time when Xerxes sent you an envoy demanding water and earth, threw the stranger into the well and threw earth upon him, ordering him to tell Xerxes that he had what he wanted from the Lacedaemonians, water and earth? Or why did Leonidas' followers willingly march out to meet certain death? Surely it was to show that they were risking their lives not only for their own freedom but for that of the other Greeks?

Herodotus (7.133.1) tells the story of Persian envoys who were pushed into a well by the Spartans, although in his version those envoys came from Darius and as a result Xerxes did not send envoys to Sparta (or to Athens) when he sent

[9] Hannibal, in Polybius' account, also used a bridge of boats to transport his elephants across the Rhône (3.46).

them to other Greek states. The assimilation of the story to the reign of Xerxes here reinforces our impression that it is his name, not that of his father Darius, which has the most profound resonances for the Greeks in association with the Persian invasion of their land. The Greeks' resistance to the tyrannical invader, who is still universally represented by Xerxes, had obviously retained its appeal as a rhetorical topos. The question of Greek freedom was especially pertinent for Polybius and his Greek-speaking audience at a time when Rome had begun to penetrate the Greek east. Millar (1987, p. 17) comments on this passage that,

> It is surely significant that at the moment of the first substantial Roman involvement in Greece, [Polybius] makes a speaker represent them as foreigners intent on enslaving Greece, directly comparable to the Persians, these *barbaroi* whose defeat was the central event in Greek history.

Polybius' use of the Persian Wars tradition, and within this Xerxes, can thus be interpreted as having potentially subversive undertones, with perhaps implicit criticism of the domination of Greece by an external – Roman – power in this period.[10]

Diodorus: alternative strands of the Xerxes-tradition?

The figure of Xerxes does not resurface at any length in Greek writing until the first century BC with the writings of Diodorus Siculus. Having grown up in the Sicilian town of Agyrium, Diodorus had lived in Egypt between around 60 and 56 BC before moving to Rome where he lived until at least 30 BC. It was during this time, in the turbulent last years of the Roman Republic, that he researched

[10] This foreshadows Plutarch's concerns about subversive usage of the tradition in the second sophistic. See below, pp. 256-9.

and wrote his *Bibliotheke*, or universal history, which attempted to document events from mythological times (beginning with the Trojan War) down to his own day; inevitably, therefore, it included the story of the Persian Wars. It is the only work of its kind from this era of which anything has survived (fifteen of the original forty books are still extant), and its author seems to have relied heavily on earlier sources for much of his material; many of the histories which he is thought to have used are now themselves lost, and much scholarly effort has been devoted to attempts to identify his sources.[11] Books 11-16 deal mainly with Greek history from the early fifth century to 340BC and include material on the Persian Wars; this section is thought to derive primarily from the work of the fourth-century historian Ephorus of Cyme[12] who wrote a *History* from the Dorian invasion to Philip's siege of Perinthus in 341 BC. In what follows I shall refer to the work of Diodorus although this is not to imply that the strands of the Xerxes-tradition preserved in his work are the product of his own era. Rather, because of his reliance upon fourth-century sources for the Persian Wars, it is more likely that the images of Xerxes seen in his work are reflective of a much earlier period. The portrayal of the king found here has much in common with the Xerxes-traditions found elsewhere, yet we also find elements which differ considerably from the more familiar strands. These elements are in many ways similar to the hints found in Ctesias of a more dramatic and fantastical story, and deal with the supposed relationship of Xerxes with Themistocles, and the king's death.

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[11] Sacks 1994 argues that Diodorus did not simply plagiarise material from earlier historians, as has been thought by many of his modern interpreters, but that he also had subjective input of his own.

[12] Hornblower 1994, p. 37. After giving details of Thermopylae and Salamis, however, Diodorus' focus shifts to Sicily, his homeland; for this material he is thought to follow a Sicilian source (probably Timaeus). The Sicilian bias in the traditions related here is clear; he sets Gelon's victory over the Carthaginians at Himera on the same day as the battle of Thermopylae and argues that it was this success which encouraged the Greeks to win at Salamis. See Sacks 1990, p. 123-4.

Diodorus' account of the second Persian invasion of Greece occurs in his eleventh book (11.1-19, 27-39); Xerxes also features, however, in his tale of the subsequent adventures and death of Themistocles (11.54-58) and we are later given a version of the Persian king's own death (11.69). The king is still described very much in terms of the symbols used by earlier authors to identify him; perhaps the most prominent of these is the emphasis upon Persian numbers during the invasion. Diodorus frequently alludes to the size of Xerxes' armament, most notably in Xerxes' enumeration of his forces at Doriscus after the crossing of the Hellespont. Here (11.3.7) the historian asserts that Xerxes had with him eight hundred thousand land forces and over twelve hundred ships;[13] he goes on to assess the contributions of the various contingents. By contrast, of course, we are shortly told that Leonidas advanced to Thermopylae with only four thousand soldiers (11.4.6), including the three hundred Spartiates who remained for the final stand.[14] Later Xerxes is said to have augmented his force with just under two hundred thousand men from Europe, bringing his total army to just under one million (not including the navy, 11.5.2).

The hyperbole continues; the familiar trope of the rivers en route running dry recurs here, the seas are said to be hidden by the sails of the ships of Xerxes, and

[13] This contrasts with Herodotus' assessment of the number of Xerxes' troops; he says that the total number of land troops commanded by Xerxes at this point was almost double that mentioned by Diodorus, being 1 700 000 (7.60.1). Herodotus, however, later gives a similar figure to Diodorus for the number of Xerxes' ships, putting this at 1207 (7.184.1).

[14] Diodorus later makes the explicit contrast between Persian and Spartan numbers at Thermopylae, although there he refers, apparently erroneously, to five hundred Spartans, asking (11.11.2), 'Who would have expected that only five hundred would have dared to charge against the hundred myriads (ταῖς ἑκατὸν μυριάσι)?' He later queries (11.11.3), 'Who would judge any braver than those Spartans who, though not equal in number to even the thousandth part of the enemy, dared to match their valour against the unbelievable multitudes (τοῖς ἀπιστουμένοις πλήθεσι)?'

Diodorus also explicitly states that that the greatest forces of which we have any historical record were those of Xerxes (11.5.3).[15] The numbers of Xerxes' forces of course meant that he had a great deal to lose; his victory at Thermopylae is described as a 'Cadmeian victory' (11.12.2), that is, one which cost him dearly, like the victory of the Thebans over the Seven. Of course, as always in accounts of the battle, numbers also work against Xerxes at Salamis, when his fleet is forced to fight in the narrow strait (11.18.4). In the use of this particular topos, then, there is nothing exceptional; moral superiority once again is seen to have overcome numerical advantage and Xerxes is, as elsewhere, dwarfed by the sheer number of the forces accompanying him.

In keeping too with precedents set in the early stages of the tradition, the symbols of the bridging, or 'yoking', of the Hellespont by Xerxes and his canal through Athos – insults to the god Poseidon – are also alluded to by Diodorus as being symbolic of the king's hybris (11.2.4, 11.3.6) although they are given less attention than in, for example, Herodotus' treatment of the invasion. Of these actions, Diodorus writes that,

> Dividing his army (Xerxes) sent enough men to yoke the Hellespont (ζεῦξαι μὲν τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον) and to dig through Athos at the neck of the Chersonese, making the passage safe and short for his forces and at the same time hoping, by the magnitude of the feat, to strike the Greeks with terror in advance.[16]

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[15] For other references by Diodorus to the size of Xerxes' forces, see also 2.5.5, where he refers to 'the host beyond number' (τοῖς ἀναριθμήτοις πλήθεσι) with which Xerxes comes to Greece, and 8.1.3, which alludes to Xerxes' 'many myriads' (ταῖς τοσαύταις μυριάσιν).

[16] 11.2.4. This is a rare occasion where a writer admits that the canal was built not through the mountain itself but at the isthmus (διασκάψαι δὲ τὸν Ἄθω κατὰ τὸν αὐχένα τῆς Χερσονήσου).

Here too we find many scenes in Xerxes' story which are already familiar to us from Herodotus, although they are not always related by Diodorus in the same degree of detail. For example, Xerxes is said to have been influenced both by his father's precedent and by Mardonius to undertake the expedition;[17] we see, in condensed form, his conversation with Demaratus prior to the battle at Thermopylae,[18] and his victory in that battle as a result of the treachery of a Greek;[19] at Salamis Xerxes is taken in by the false message from Themistocles;[20] similarly, he later believes Themistocles' message that the Greeks are planning to destroy the Hellespontine bridge and as a result makes his cowardly escape from Greece;[21] finally he delegates responsibility to Mardonius for the remainder of the campaign so that he can return to Asia.[22]

We are also given snapshots here of the cruel Xerxes; at 11.8.1, for example, he tells his troops at Thermopylae that if they storm the approach they will be rewarded with gifts but that punishment for fleeing will be death, and later, at 11.19.4, he puts to death the Phoenicians who were chiefly responsible for beginning the flight from Salamis, threatening to punish the rest. The presentation of Xerxes and his army as a destructive force also persists in Diodorus' work. The vandalism carried out by the king and his troops is stressed on various occasions; this image of Xerxes as destroyer of all things sacred is one

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[17] 11.1.2-3, 11.2.2, cf. Hdt. 7.5.1-3.
[18] 11.6.1-2, cf. Hdt. 7.101.1-105.1. In Diodorus' version Xerxes is given only one sentence of *oratio recta*, when he asks, 'Will the Greeks flee faster than my horses, or will they dare to face such forces in battle?' (11.6.1) As in Herodotus' account, Xerxes also mocks Demaratus for asserting that the Greeks will risk their lives for the sake of freedom.
[19] The Greek traitor is said to be a Trachinian by Diodorus at 11.8.4, but cf. Hdt., who tells us at 7.213.1 that the culprit was a Malian, and names him as Ephialtes.
[20] 11.17.1-3. Cf. Hdt. 8.75.1-76.3.
[21] 11.19.5-6. Cf. Hdt. 8.110.1-3, where Themistocles tells Xerxes that he has actually persuaded the Greeks *not* to destroy the bridge.
[22] 11.19.6. Cf. Hdt. 8.113.1-115.1.

which emerges even more clearly in later literature, notably in the work of Pausanias during the second sophistic (see below, pp. 271-6).

We first see such disregard for the sanctuaries of the Greeks in Diodorus' narrative of the march through Greece. He notes the king's orders for the sack of that most sacred sanctuary, Delphi, whilst en route (11.14.2):

> Then the king passed through the land of the Dorians, doing it no harm, for they had allied with the Persians. Here he left a part of his force and ordered it to go to Delphi, to burn the sanctuary of Apollo and carry off the votive offerings, while he advanced into Boeotia with the rest of the barbarians and encamped there.

In the event, however, nature and the gods have their revenge and a thunderstorm afflicts the troops dispatched to carry out the dirty deed; many of the Persians there are killed by fallen rocks dislodged by the storm, and the rest flee.[23] Such a reprimand from the gods does not serve to stop Xerxes in his tracks, however, as he continues to wreak havoc which culminates in the sack of Athens (11.14.5):

> Xerxes, as he passed through Boeotia, laid waste the land of the Thespiaeans and burned Plataea, which was deserted, for those who lived in these cities had fled altogether to the Peloponnese. After this he invaded Attica and ravaged the land, and then razed Athens to the ground and burned the temples of the gods. While the king was occupied with this, the fleet sailed from Euboea to Attica, having sacked both Euboea and the coast of Attica.

[23] Cf. Hdt. 8.37.1-38.1. This is not the only time where nature works against the Persian force; shortly after Thermopylae the fleet is also afflicted by a storm at Sepias in Magnesia, and the commander Megabates loses over three hundred war ships as well as cavalry transports and other vessels (11.12.3, cf. Hdt. 7.188.1-190.1, where four hundred ships are said to have been lost).

The characteristics of the Persian king as a hybristic despot which appear in Diodorus' history thus reflect the image of Xerxes seen in earlier sources. He is terrifying, pernicious and overwhelming, yet at the same time, as in Herodotus' account, Xerxes can be seen too as a cowardly deserter, leaving Mardonius behind to continue with the campaign whilst he heads for home. This is highlighted in the course of Diodorus' account of the battle of Mycale (fought on the same day as Plataea), where the leaders of the Persians are said to have called their troops together and, to inspire them to fight, to have told them that Xerxes himself was coming to help them (11.35.4). The anecdote serves to emphasise the reality that in fact Xerxes was long gone by this time. Later, we are told that when Xerxes heard of the defeat of his troops at both Plataea and Mycale he left some of his army at Sardis to carry on the war, but set off back to Ecbatana with the rest; again, a mockery is made of his earlier bravado and fierce image.

Many decades after his retreat from Greece and his death, the humiliation of Xerxes in the Greek tradition continues. Diodorus relates (17.72) in his account of Alexander's invasion of Persia that, as games and sacrifices were being held in honour of the victory, a Greek courtesan named Thaïs suggested that Alexander should join in a triumphal procession and burn the palaces. The woman led the procession and (17.72.6),

> As the others all did the same, soon the whole area around the palaces was consumed by flames, so great was the blaze. It was most incredible that the impiety (ἀσέβημα) of Xerxes, king of the Persians, against the acropolis of Athens, should, many years later, be repaid in the same way by one woman,

> a citizen of the wronged city, in sport.[24]

Xerxes' apparently overwhelming power is thus reduced to ashes in revenge for his actions; he is humiliated once more, and this time, in another insult to his masculinity, by a woman.

The work of Diodorus also records other less familiar strands of the Xerxes tradition which serve to enhance the negative image we have received of the barbarian king, thus complementing motifs seen elsewhere. One detail which has found its way into Diodorus' account but which has not appeared in any of our earlier extant sources concerns events at Thermopylae. The course of the battle is described in much the same way as in Herodotus' account, although with one significant incident added. Diodorus records a direct attack at night upon the Persian camp by the Spartans (11.10).[25] Describing the general chaos among the Persians during the incident, the historian writes that many of the barbarians were slain; of the king himself, he says (11.10.3-4):

> Indeed, if the king had remained in the royal tent, he could easily have been slain by the Greeks and the whole war would have reached a swift conclusion. But instead Xerxes had rushed out into the confusion, and the Greeks, rushing into the tent, killed virtually all those they caught there. As

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[24] The incident is also related by Plutarch (*Alexander* 38) Quintus Curtius (5.7), and, briefly, Arrian (*Anabasis* 3.18.11-12). The presentation of Alexander's invasion of Persia as a campaign of vengeance for Xerxes' expedition against Greece is a recurring feature in the Alexander-sources, although these are all much later than the events which they portray. For a collection of the literary evidence, see Flower 2000, pp. 112-18. Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1997 uses the archaeological evidence from Persepolis to suggest that Alexander's burning of the temples there did indeed correspond with the motive of revenge against Xerxes which was later ascribed to the Macedonian king by the written sources. She writes (p. 182) that 'it was mainly the palaces of Xerxes and the symbols of Xerxes' royal power which formed the target of a pyrotechnic *damnatio memoriae*'.

[25] Flower (1998) discusses the contrast between Herodotus' account of Thermopylae and that of Diodorus/Ephorus and suggests that Ephorus may have taken the story of the night attack from the poetry of Simonides.

> long as it was night they wandered through the whole encampment seeking Xerxes, with good reason.

The event, an early predecessor of the US forces' search for the elusive Saddam Hussein in Baghdad in April 2003, once more removes Xerxes from the centre of the action; he is again the coward who runs away rather than standing up to fight, and therefore deserving only of the Greeks' scorn. Plutarch later drew upon this incident in his *On the Malice of Herodotus* (866a); there too the Spartans fail to come face to face with the evasive Xerxes.[26]

It has already been noted that the Greek literary tradition adopted the figure of the Athenian commander Themistocles as a foil for Xerxes; outwitted by the cunning Themistocles (notably at Salamis, where his ruse forces the Persians to fight in the narrows), Xerxes is shown as tactically inept. In the tradition preserved by Diodorus, however, the relationship of the two leaders is pushed even further. Where other sources claim that Themistocles, during his exile from Athens, was received in Persia by Xerxes' son Artaxerxes,[27] Diodorus' version of Themistocles' story (11.56.3-58.5) actually brings him face to face with the king who led the invasion against Greece. Lenardon (1978, p. 137) has pointed out that it is highly unlikely that Themistocles reached Persia by 465 (the year of Xerxes' death), and comments that, 'such an encounter by its very nature smacks of dramatic invention. Themistocles, the hero of Salamis, was brought face to face with his former enemy (and friend!) Xerxes, in a theatrical scene which builds upon allegations that Themistocles had been in collusion with

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[26] See below, pp.247-8, for discussion of Plutarch's treatment of the incident.
[27] See Thucydides 1.137.3-138.5. Plutarch (*Themistocles* 27.1) says that Charon of Lampsacus agreed with Thucydides in bringing Themistocles before Artaxerxes, not Xerxes.

Xerxes all along.' Indeed, the idea that Xerxes and Themistocles came face to face makes for such a dramatic presentation of the story that it seems unlikely that the other version, that Themistocles met Artaxerxes, would have been invented as an alternative![28]

Diodorus' version of the story (presumably following Ephorus) is as follows: Themistocles, after his ostracism by the Athenians, flees first to Argos and from there to Admetus, king of the Molossians. When the Spartans demand Themistocles from Admetus for punishment he escapes and makes his way to Asia. There he meets his friend Lysitheides and asks him to lead him to Xerxes. Themistocles is brought before the king by means of a ruse in which he is concealed in a wagon like one of Xerxes' courtesans; here already we are given a hint of the luxury and sexual liaisons marking Xerxes' lifestyle! Themistocles works his charm once more on Xerxes (11.56.8): '[Lysitheides] brought him before the king who, when he had allowed Themistocles to speak and learned that he had done the king no wrong, absolved him from punishment.' This faith which Xerxes shows in Themistocles makes the Persian king appear naïve, to say the least, in the light of what we have already been told of Themistocles' deception at Salamis (11.17). Once more the contrast between gullible Persian and cunning Greek is stressed.

The story of Themistocles' Persian adventures does not end here. As seen in earlier accounts of Xerxes' life, the king is presented as being subject to a strong

[28] Rhodes 1970, p. 394 comments that 'it is hard to believe that an inventor looking for details to fill out his story would have had the restraint not to produce that encounter between Themistocles and Xerxes which came into the legend as a later "improvement".'

feminine influence. Diodorus relates the tale of Xerxes' sister Mandane whose sons had been killed at Salamis (11.57). In her grief, Mandane begs Xerxes to take vengeance upon Themistocles; when the king pays her no attention she persuades the Persian nobles and masses to call for vengeance. Faced with their demands, Xerxes, in an act of fairness which may seem out of character for the despot we have come to know, decides to form a jury of the noblest Persians to decide Themistocles' fate. Here an apparently Greek, democratic aspect has found its way into the tradition; we remember that Themistocles had been ostracised, and subsequently condemned *in absentia* as part of the Athenian democratic process. Perhaps it was natural for a Greek writer to assume that he would be tried by a similar process at the Persian court. The incident, according to Diodorus, is what precipitates Themistocles' learning of the Persian language with the result that by the time the trial comes around he is able to defend himself and secure his acquittal. Diodorus reports the king's delight; Xerxes bestows upon Themistocles gifts, including a beautiful Persian wife and the cities of Magnesia to provide him with grain for bread, Myus for meat and Lampsacus for wine (11.57.6-7).

We might well wonder why Xerxes is presented by Diodorus as being so keen to court Themistocles. One possible motivation for such behaviour might have been that the king hoped he would assist in another invasion of Greece; for a Greek source to suggest that he might be capable of a second attack makes the Persian king seem even more threatening. Diodorus tells us (11.58.2-3) that some historians say Xerxes invited Themistocles to take command of another invasion of Greece; Themistocles made the king swear under oath that he would not

march against the Greeks without him. Themistocles is redeemed as the ultimate patriot, sacrificing himself for the good of his country, just as Leonidas did on the battlefield at Thermopylae. In a final act of loyalty to his homeland, he ensures the Greeks' safety through committing suicide by drinking bull's blood.

As far as Xerxes is concerned in this version of the tradition, then, Themistocles has the last laugh and the king is left looking ridiculous once more. The whole story smacks of the 'novelistic' and perhaps owes something to the kind of romantic fantasy seen earlier in the work of Ctesias.[29] Once again the Persian king is mocked as a gullible fool and the arrogant despot is reduced to an absurd figure who is unable to see through the noble duplicity of his enemy. Usually, of course, the keeping of one's oaths is seen as a positive attribute in the Greek tradition and is one of the fundamental principles of social interaction; it also involves upholding one of the laws instituted by Zeus himself, in his role as Zeus Horkios. Thus, oath-breaking was perceived as a supreme insult to Zeus.[30] In this situation, however, the complexity of the Greek attitude towards barbarians (and towards this barbarian king in particular) is highlighted. Far from redeeming his character, Xerxes' principled action simply makes him seem idiotic. Just as Themistocles' deception becomes a positive attribute when practised for the good of his country, so Xerxes' apparent uprightness here is turned on its head as part of the derision of his character. He is unable to maintain even the terrifying despotic image consistently.[31]

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[29] Podlecki (1975, p. 99) suggests that perhaps Ephorus, as Diodorus' source for this material, drew on Ctesias here.

[30] The results of oath-breaking are seen in *Iliad* 4, for example, in which Pandarus breaks the truce-oath, thus causing supreme offence to Zeus.

[31] For an earlier example of this failure to maintain the frightening image, see above, pp. 87-9, on Herodotus.

The 'novelistic' element of the story of Xerxes continues here as in Ctesias' account with Diodorus' narration of the king's death (11.69). By contrast with the heroic suicide of Themistocles Xerxes' demise is once more described as the result of a plot formulated by some of his closest associates. Here we see Artabanus again attempting to usurp the kingship by killing Xerxes.[32] Once more he plots with a eunuch who is highly trusted by the king;[33] the scheming of an emasculated Persian mirrors that of the female Mandane seen earlier in the story of Themistocles. Artabanus slays Xerxes, then sets out after the dead king's sons (Darius, Artaxerxes and Hystaspes) and again (as in Ctesias' account) tries to convince Artaxerxes that his father has been murdered by Darius. When Artaxerxes realises that Artabanus is responsible, he takes revenge by killing his father's murderer; thus Artaxerxes becomes king. This court intrigue, featuring as it does political subterfuge and harem scandal, with the conspiring eunuch and the duplicitous Artabanus, reflects once more the 'novelistic' tendencies which were foreshadowed in the works of Herodotus and Ctesias.

As with the fourth-century Ctesias, therefore, Diodorus' portrayal of Xerxes focuses in part upon the 'human interest' aspects of his story, leaning towards what we now perceive as a 'romantic' trend in historiography. In spite of the fact that his history records traditions – especially those relating to the king's association with Themistocles – which differ considerably from those seen in other accounts, these aspects of Xerxes' story still conform to the dualistic perception of the Persian king seen elsewhere in western literature. There are two

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[32] For Ctesias' account of the death of Xerxes, see *FGrH* 688 F 13.33 (29). See above, pp. 134-6, for an analysis.

[33] Note, however, that this eunuch is named by Diodorus as Mithridates, where in Ctesias' account he was called Aspamistres.

sides to the Xerxes of Diodorus; he is, on the one hand, the epitome of arrogance and hybris, and on the other, the inept ruler – a frivolous and worthless figure held up for ridicule.

Xerxes in the Biblical tradition

A rare insight into the presentation of Xerxes in a source originating from outside the Greek world of this period is presented to us in the form of the Old Testament Book of Esther, which Pfeiffer (1948, p. 732) describes as 'a brief historical novel relating the vicissitudes of Esther at the court of Persia and the origin of the Jewish festival of Purim.'[34] The source is not without its own problems of interpretation, however, not least because, as with much of the Old Testament, it has been preserved in more than one form. The original Hebrew version of the text names the Persian king of the story as Ahasuerus, yet the Greek translation (the Septuagint) supplements this with 'Artaxerxes', presumably on the basis of the phonetic similarity of the two names.[35] This caused a great deal of scholarly confusion concerning the identity of the king (agreement could not be reached even as to which Artaxerxes may have been intended) until the discovery of Persian inscriptions which enabled a secure identification of Ahasuerus with Xerxes; the king is named in some of his inscriptions as *Khshayarsha* in the

[34] The date of *Esther*'s composition is uncertain; Pfeiffer 1948, pp. 740-2 summarises the issue and suggests a date of around 125 BC.
[35] Josephus (*AJ* 11.6) makes the same connection, placing Esther's story in Artaxerxes' reign.

Persian language, and *Khishi'arshu* in the Babylonian equivalent, and this has been thought to correspond phonetically with the Hebrew 'Ahasuerus'.[36]

The presentation of the Persian king seen in the Biblical text can in many ways be seen to conform to the patterns already noted in the Greek sources although we must be wary (as was also the case with the Persian inscriptions) of seeking corroboration for what the Greek tradition tells us, rather then viewing this as an independent source. Paton (1908, p. 64), for example, bought into the Greek ideological construction of Xerxes, and indeed Persian kings in general, seen here; he described the Xerxes of *Esther* as a 'sensual and capricious despot' corresponding with Xerxes' character as seen in Herodotus, and explained the controversy over the identity of the king by saying that 'monarchs of this type were common in the ancient Orient, and the narrative contains so little that is characteristic, that earlier scholars were able to identify Ahasuerus with every one of the kings of Media and Persia.'

The story told in *Esther* takes place as follows:

1.1-22 – Ahasuerus (Xerxes) holds rich feasts for the nobles of his kingdom and the people of Susa whilst his queen, Vashti, does the same for the women. Xerxes then asks for the queen to be brought before him, to show her beauty off to his people, but she refuses. In his anger, having taken the advice of his

[36] Paton 1908, pp. 53-4 sets out the Persian evidence used to confirm the identification of Ahasuerus with Xerxes. Pfeiffer 1948, pp. 737-8 notes that this presents some serious historical difficulties, not least that, according to the Greek sources, Xerxes' queen was called Amestris. This, however, simply confirms that 'the story of Esther is not history, but fiction' (p.737). On the stylistic relation of the book of Esther to the Greek novel, see Wills 1994, pp. 228-31.

counsellors, Xerxes deposes Vashti and enforces by way of a decree the submission of wives to their husbands throughout the kingdom.

2.1-23 – He later regrets deposing his queen and has the most beautiful virgins of his kingdom brought before him so that he may choose a new queen. Esther, who is of Jewish descent, and who had been in the care of her cousin Mordecai, is one of these women; she is placed in the royal harem in the custody of Hegai. Concealing her Jewish religion, she spends a year at the palace with the other women until the time comes for them to be brought before the king as his concubines; Xerxes chooses her as his new queen. Meanwhile, Mordecai overhears two of Xerxes' chamberlains plotting to kill him; he has Esther communicate this information to the king.

3.1-15 – Later, Mordecai refuses to do obeisance to Haman, the king's right-hand man. He reveals to Haman that he is a Jew and as a result Haman plots to massacre the Jews by telling Xerxes that a certain people throughout the empire are failing to observe his laws; thus he underhandedly obtains the king's permission to carry out the genocide.

4.1-17 – Esther learns of this decree from Mordecai and resolves to intervene.

5.1-14 – Esther invites Haman and the king to a banquet, after which Haman again encounters Mordecai. Haman then erects gallows from which he intends to hang Mordecai.

6.1-14 – The king is unable to sleep and asks for the royal chronicles to be read to him. As a result he learns that Mordecai has not been rewarded for warning him of the conspiracy; he asks Haman how a faithful subject should be honoured, and Haman (thinking that Xerxes is speaking of him) suggests that he should be paraded through the streets on horseback wearing royal attire. He learns,

however, that the intended recipient of the honour is Mordecai and carries out the ceremony himself.

7.1-10 – at the banquet which she has arranged for Haman and the king Esther asks Xerxes that she and her people should not be murdered; Xerxes learns that Haman was responsible for this plan and then suspects that, to add insult to injury, Haman is attempting to assault Esther. As a result, he has him hanged on the gallows originally intended for Mordecai.

8.1-17 – Mordecai takes Haman's place in Xerxes' court. Xerxes authorises Mordecai to make a new decree making the former one harmless for Jews; a royal edict is despatched which allows the Jews to kill anyone who attacked them on the day which had been marked out for the massacre.

9.1-32 – on the prearranged day the Jews fight back against their enemies; the king also grants Esther's request for the slaughter by the Jews to continue on another day. These events are said to be the origin of the festival of Purim.

10.1-3 – Xerxes extracts a tribute from his subjects. Mordecai is said to have been greatly esteemed by the Jews.[37]

Within this 'novelistic' tale there are several key elements which are interesting for the way in which they relate to the presentation of Xerxes. The most striking image of the first chapter in particular is the luxury and wealth of the Persian court; the prolonged feasting which takes place (for one hundred and eighty-seven days in total, 1.4-5) is said to be a display of 'the riches of his glorious

[37] The Greek Septuagint version of the book contains several extended textual additions not found in the Hebrew *Esther*. These additions are summarised by Baldwin 1984, pp. 45-7, who also gives a translation at pp. 119-26. She writes of these sections that, 'The textual additions provide, in the main, evidence of tendencies to 'improve' on the original, *i.* by documenting its authenticity and so making it more credible, and *ii.* by introducing into the story the name of God' (p. 47).

kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty'.[38] Descriptions are given too of the luxurious adornments of the palace: 'white, green, and blue hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble' (1.6). Meanwhile, 'wine in abundance' is drunk from 'vessels of gold' (1.7). Feasting is a key motif throughout the book; another feast is held after Esther is appointed queen (2.18) and then of course we are told of the feast held by Esther for the king and Haman (5.4, 7.1). The vast wealth of the Persian palace goes together with the great power of Xerxes himself; we are told in the opening verse that he reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia. The queen's disobedience is obviously, judging by the reaction of the king, unexpected; here is a man who is unused to having his power challenged.

Along with this picture of wealth and power we are given an insight into the Persian royal harem in the second chapter in particular; as with Greek images of Xerxes' reign this may owe more to preconceived Jewish ideas of the way in which Persian kings lived than to the reality of the Persian court. The availability of a selection of women who are at the king's disposal and whose sole purpose is to serve the king (sexually, we assume, although this is never explicitly stated) is all part of the perceived sensuality of Xerxes; the women, described as virgins (2.2), are said to have spent a whole year devoted to treatments for their purification before being brought before the king (2.12). They are in the care of Hegai who is said to be 'keeper of the women' (2.8); a Greek source here might

[38] Translations of the Hebrew are taken here from the King James Bible.

well have described him as chief eunuch! Meanwhile, the suggestion of a conspiracy against the king (2.21-23) adds a hint of the political intrigue often seen in Greek portrayals of the court of the tyrant.

As for the personality of the king himself, we are presented with an image of an irascible monarch; his extreme reaction to his wife's disobedience demonstrates his hot-tempered nature, and his later treatment of Haman, formerly his most trusted advisor, would seem to correspond to the Greek sources' view of a brutal despot. Later, although he is unaware that the Jews are the intended victims, it is his apparent intolerance of diversity within his empire which leads him to agree to Haman's plan for the massacre (3.8). We might consider here too his apparent lack of concern that people throughout his kingdom are dying at the hands of the Jews; he grants Esther's request that the slaughter should continue for an extra day, as well as having the ten sons of Haman hanged (9.13-14).

Viewed from a Jewish perspective, however, such behaviour, although demonstrative in various ways of the king's wrath and his brutality, ultimately works for the good of the Jews. Xerxes is respectful towards the Jews in general and to Esther and Mordecai in particular; those who suffer in the story are Haman and other perpetrators of persecution, punished for their actions against the Jews in spite of their apparent allegiance to the Persian king. By rewarding Mordecai for his warning concerning the conspiracy, and later appointing him to high office, the king demonstrates his tolerance of a non-Persian ethnic group and religion in spite of the fact that these people are said to observe their own laws throughout the Persian empire (3.8). Although Xerxes takes Esther as his

queen unaware of her Jewish descent, the knowledge that she is a Jewess does not ultimately detract from her standing at the Persian court as the king proves to be willing to accede to her demands. As Pfeiffer (1948, p. 738) points out, 'It is hardly consistent with Persian customs for a king to appoint an "Agagite" (Amalekite) or a Jew as grand vizier...and to make a non-Persian woman his queen'; he later (p. 739) notes that the narrative scheme in which Jews triumph over Gentiles appears also in other Jewish tales of the second century BC, and comments that in all such stories, 'the enemies of the Jews met their doom at the moment of their greatest triumph.' The story thus takes on a kind of 'fairy-tale' appearance. Were Xerxes to have been given as bad a press in the Jewish tradition as in the Greek, there were surely plenty of other Persian kings with whom the events here could have been identified. It therefore seems to have originated in a Jewish tradition concerning Xerxes' benevolence; this text offers a possible alternative to the wholly negative reception of the king in a tradition originating from outside the Persian realm.

Josephus' benevolent Persian king

The Biblical redemption of Xerxes (at least as far as the Jewish tradition is concerned) finds its Greek counterpart in the work of the Jewish historian Josephus who was involved in the turbulent events within the Jewish world of the first century AD. Having spent time at Rome in early adulthood, he returned to Jerusalem on the eve of the Jewish Revolt of AD 66 against Roman domination of Judaea and attempted without success to persuade his countrymen against this course of action. Having been captured in the course of the war,

Josephus later claimed that his life was spared when he prophesied to Vespasian, then a commander, that he would become emperor; he remained in captivity until 69 when the prophecy came true. Prior to the eventual fall of Jerusalem in 70, Josephus made several unsuccessful attempts to persuade the city to surrender; after the war he settled in Rome and was given Roman citizenship, a pension and a house there. It was from this point that he began to write; his *Jewish War* was originally written in Aramaic and later translated into Greek but the rest of his works were written in Greek.

Whilst Josephus places the events of the Biblical Book of Esther in the reign of Artaxerxes (11.6), following the Greek version of the book,[39] he uses a different set of episodes to demonstrate the beneficence of Xerxes towards the Jews. In the eleventh book of his *Jewish Antiquities* (a history of the Jews from the Creation to just before the outbreak of the revolt from Rome), he deals with Jewish history under Persian rule. Xerxes is credited here with the generous treatment of two individuals – Ezra and Nehemiah – whose stories feature also in the Old Testament although there they are said to take place in the time of Artaxerxes. Xerxes is introduced by Josephus as follows (*Jewish Antiquities* 11.120):

> When Darius died, his son Xerxes took over the kingship and inherited also his piety and honour towards god (τὴν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν εὐσέβειάν τε καὶ τιμήν). For concerning religious ritual he followed his father in all things, and was exceedingly generous toward the Jews (πρὸς τοὺς Ἰουδαίους ἔσξε φιλοτιμότατα).

[39] Rajak 1974 Vol. 2, p. 121, offers a range of possible explanations as to why Josephus places Esther's story in Artaxerxes' reign. The result of this placement is that 'Josephus already has something to record for Artaxerxes's reign, and is short of something for Xerxes's'; this may help to explain why the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah appear in Josephus' account of Xerxes' reign.

Josephus then goes on to relate the story of Ezra (*Jewish Antiquities* 11.121-158), the chief priest in Babylon, who became friendly with Xerxes. Ezra had decided to go to Jerusalem, taking with him some of the Jews from Babylon, and requested that Xerxes send an introductory letter for the satraps of Syria. Josephus relates the text of this letter (11.123-130) in which Xerxes grants his permission for Ezra and any Jews wishing to accompany him to go to Jerusalem. Xerxes asserts here that he and his seven advisors have decided that the Jews should 'see to matters in Judaea, following God's law, and bring to the God of the Israelites the gifts which I and my friends have promised' (11.124). Ezra is to be allowed to take all the gold and silver dedicated to God in Babylon for dedication in Jerusalem, and to make as many further dedications as he wishes, taking the expenses from the royal treasury.[40] Xerxes also says that he has written to the treasurers of Syria and Phoenicia to the effect that the laws of Ezra shall be carried out there; he offers too one hundred measures of wheat as an offering to God and exempts Ezra and his companions from tribute. Finally, Ezra is entrusted with overseeing the observance of the laws of God and the king in Syria in Phoenicia.

Ezra and the Jews are naturally delighted with the king's 'piety towards God and his goodwill towards Ezra' (τὴν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν εὐσέβειαν καὶ τὴν πρὸς τὸν Ἔσδραν εὔνοιαν, 11.132). As a result, Ezra and his companions are able to return to Jerusalem in safety. In his *Jewish War* (2.86) Josephus corroborates, albeit incidentally, this version of the return to Jerusalem as taking place during Xerxes' reign: there, he writes that 'the miseries which had been endured by the

[40] The rich offerings from the king and his advisors are later detailed at 11.136.

Jews under Herod in a few years exceeded all that their ancestors had suffered during all the years since they left Babylon to return to their country in the reign of Xerxes.'

This positive picture of the king's religious tolerance, piety, munificence and respect for another culture is of course entirely at odds with what we are led to believe by the mainstream Greek traditions; Josephus' Xerxes is here wholly unblemished by any association with violence or hybristic behaviour. This image is reinforced by the story of Nehemiah, which is related later (although with considerably less specific detail concerning Xerxes) in the same book of the *Jewish Antiquities* (11.159-183). Nehemiah is one of Xerxes' cup-bearers who, on hearing of troubled times in Jerusalem, is saddened by the news. The king notices his downhearted mood and enquires as to the cause of it; Nehemiah requests permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls which have been destroyed and to complete the building of the temple there. In a pattern similar to that seen in the Ezra-story Xerxes gives Nehemiah letters instructing the local satraps to pay him respect and to give him the supplies he requires; Nehemiah is then able to go to Jerusalem to carry out the building work in spite of the hostility of the neighbouring peoples. Once again Xerxes is seen to give his blessing to the Jews.

The two episodes related here have been the source of much chronological confusion, largely because the Biblical versions of these stories assign them to

Artaxerxes' reign rather than to that of Xerxes.[41] There is, however, general disorder in the Old Testament's chronology of the Achaemenid kings[42] and Josephus appears to try to rectify the situation by manipulating the source material with which he was working. As the basis for his Ezra narrative he seems to have used *1 Esdras*, the substantially altered Greek version of the Hebrew *Ezra*. Josephus follows the sequence of events related in *1 Esdras* but obviously recognised that his source's chronology of the Achaemenid kings was incorrect (*1 Esdras* appears to place the reign of Artaxerxes as following on directly from that of Darius); he therefore 'alters the names of the monarchs so that they follow one another in the proper order' (Rajak 1974, Vol. 2, p. 120). This involves transferring the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah to the rule of Xerxes from that of Artaxerxes; Rajak (1974, Vol. 2, p. 120) comments that 'There seems little reason for [this], except the desire for neatness; without it there would be a gap in Xerxes's reign, with nothing to fill it at this stage.' A problem arises for Josephus when he later alludes to the chronology of Nehemiah's story in relation to the sequence of Persian kings. He asserts that Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in the twenty-fifth year of Xerxes' reign (11.167); the problem is that Xerxes reigned for only twenty years (485-465 BC).

However infuriating the chronological difficulties of Josephus' account may seem, however, they do not detract for our purposes from the fact that Josephus was prepared to present a wholly untarnished image of Xerxes as benevolent

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[41] Ehrhardt 1990, pp. 191-6 discusses the problems of dating the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah. He shows (p. 192) that Nehamiah's mission almost certainly took place under Artaxerxes I, but notes that it is not possible to decide whether that of Ezra occurred in 458 BC (in the reign of Artaxerxes I), or 398 BC (Artaxerxes II); that is, before or after that of Nehemiah.

[42] See Pfeiffer 1948, p. 757, and Rajak 1974, Vol 2, pp. 118-20. The discussion here of Josephus' manipulation of his sources relies heavily on Rajak's lucid analysis.

Persian king, respectful of, and generous towards, the Jewish people. In his work *Against Apion*, an apologia for Judaism and an attack on anti-Semitic writers, Josephus makes the claim that some Jews fought on the side of Xerxes in the invasion of Greece (*Against Apion* 1.172-174). He cites verses from the poetry of Choerilus of Samos (see above, p. 30, with n. 18) as proof of this claim, basing his conclusion upon the fact that Choerilus refers to a people from the 'Solymian mountains', which Josephus identifies with Hierosolyma, that is, Jerusalem. The connection between the two has been seen to be wholly erroneous,[43] yet once again the technicalities do not hide the fact that Josephus was wholly prepared to use this claim as part of his proud assertion of the antiquity of the Jewish people. He clearly saw no shame in the association of his people with Xerxes' expedition, by clear contrast with the stain of medism which haunted Greek states – Thebes in particular – for centuries after the invasion. So conditioned are we by the sources from mainland Greece to view such a claim as an accusation of dishonour that it comes as something of a shock to find that there is an alternative perspective!

The question remains as to why Josephus is so generous towards Xerxes, although it might well be argued that the very fact that we feel the need to ask that question is a result of our having been 'brainwashed' by the mainstream Greek tradition into thinking that the only possible stance is a hostile one. In general, Persians are given a good press in the Jewish tradition because it was under Persian rule that the Jews were allowed to return to Babylon. The sympathetic perspective on Xerxes seen here may well result also in part from

[43] See Momigliano 1975, p. 77, and Stern 1984, pp. 5-6.

the fact that at all times under the Achaemenids there were Jews scattered throughout the Persian empire, which no doubt allowed first of all for the possibility of witnessing at first-hand Persian benevolence, and secondly, for the perpetuation of such positive traditions.

At the same time, for Josephus, the rigid classification of self and other seen in the Greek sources does not hold; again this may be related to the wide geographical spread of the Jewish population in his time. Rajak (2001, pp. 137-46) has shown that the 'them and us' dichotomy is not straightforward for Josephus. For example (p. 139), he often uses expressions such as 'both Greeks and barbarians', or 'neither Greeks nor barbarians' to conjure up the whole world, but it is unclear where the Jews fit in; they often appear to sit outside this polarity, and in some episodes of the *Jewish War* the Greeks and Jews are presented as natural antagonists. Elsewhere, Josephus even finds it possible to use the term 'barbarians' to denote all non-Greeks, including the Jews themselves (*Jewish War* 1.5-6 – see Rajak 2001, p. 275). The classification of any ethnic group or individual as an opposing polarity thus becomes difficult when the definition of the Jewish community itself appears to be so fluid; Persia, or Xerxes individually, is therefore not required to be the symbolic antithesis of 'Jewishness' in the way in which they were perceived by Greeks as the opposite of 'Greekness'.

In Josephus' work we find only one instance of the negative Xerxes-image with which we are more familiar. In the second book of his *Jewish War*, Josephus quotes the speech of the Roman general Agrippa, aimed at dissuading the Jews

from taking up arms against Rome in AD 66. As part of his argument, Agrippa suggests that it would be foolish to resist Roman domination; in support of this he adduces examples of others who have succumbed to the rule of Rome. One of these states is Athens, of which Agrippa says (*Jewish War* 2.358):

> Even the Athenians are now slaves to Rome – the Athenians who, in the cause of the freedom of Greece, gave up their city to the flames, and pursued Xerxes, who was like a runaway slave on a single ship, the haughty Xerxes who sailed through land and marched over sea, for whom the sea did not have room and who brought an army bigger than Europe; the Athenians who by little Salamis broke mighty Asia.

The familiar clichés resound once more – Xerxes' vast army and navy, his arrogance, and his transgressive behaviour in relation to the Hellespont and Athos are all alluded to here. It is surely significant, however, that on the one occasion in Josephus' work where Xerxes is alluded to in these terms, the words are in the mouth of a non-Jew, a Roman, and are presented as an arrogant boast of Rome's own irresistible power.

Nowhere in Josephus' own surrounding narrative does this kind of negative rhetoric concerning Xerxes appear. Here Agrippa, a representative of Rome's oppression of the Jews, implicitly makes the comparison between Roman domination of the Jews and Persian aggression against Greece, as represented by Xerxes; in fact, it could be said, Rome's actions have been even worse than those of the Persians in that where Xerxes failed, Rome actually succeeded in achieving world dominion. It seems that this Roman, in the words given to him by Josephus, unwittingly, and through his use of the familiar Xerxes-stereotype,

condemns the behaviour of his own people. Whilst Josephus' own view concerning Xerxes seems to be a magnanimous one, he is nonetheless able to recognise the emotive potential of the dominant negative view of Xerxes' actions; this can therefore be used, as it suits him, as a means of criticising Roman policy.

Greek foe, Jewish friend

The sources examined in this chapter reveal not only that there are alternative aspects of the negative Xerxes-tradition in addition to those that dominate – as seen in Diodorus' account of some lesser-known features of the story – but also that a completely different view is possible, as seen in this case from the Jewish perspective. Although the evidence for such alternatives is scant we learn from this that it is perhaps historical accident that the censorious attitude towards Xerxes has predominated for the last two and a half thousand years. In the western tradition, Xerxes has almost always been seen in the context of his invasion of Greece – either planning for it, carrying it out or returning from it.

It is surely significant, then, that in neither the Biblical testimony nor Josephus' stories of Ezra and Nehemiah is the invasion given even a cursory mention, just as there is nothing alluding to it in what remains of the Persian sources for Xerxes' reign. For the Greeks and the western inheritors of their traditions this was the defining action of the Persian king, yet, by contrast, the Jewish perspective reveals that for other peoples these events had no relevance whatsoever for their judgement of Xerxes; other incidents were of greater significance. The portrayal of Xerxes as a friend to the Jewish people serves as a

reminder that there are possibilities for seeing him from a very different angle; in spite of this, however, the hostile Greek perspective, from which Xerxes has been brought to us by the overwhelming majority of our sources since 479 BC, has stifled any possibility for his redemption.

CHAPTER SIX

Everybody Was Talking About Him... Xerxes in the Latin Tradition

> It is only death which reveals
> the puny size of human bodies. People believe
> that ships once sailed over Athos, and all the lies that Greece
> has the nerve to tell in her histories: that the sea was covered with boats,
> and the ocean provided a solid surface for wheels. We believe
> deep rivers failed, that streams were all drunk dry by the Persians
> at lunch, and whatever Sostratus sings with his soaking pinions.
> Yet in what state did the king return on leaving Salamis –
> the one who would vent his savage rage on Corus and Eurus
> with whips, an outrage never endured in Aeolus' cave,
> the one who bound the earth-shaking god himself with fetters
> (that, indeed, was somewhat mild; why he even considered
> he deserved a branding! What god would be slave to a man like that?) –
> yet in what state did he return? In a solitary warship, slowly
> pushing its way through the bloody waves which were thick with corpses.
> Such is the price so often claimed by our coveted glory.
>
> (Juvenal, *Satire* 10.172-87)[1]

In this way a Roman poet, writing in Latin in the second century AD, expressed his version of the Xerxes-tradition, choosing the Persian king as an illustrative example in his satire upon human ambition and vanity. He felt no need to name the subject of his comments, so sure was he that the figure would be sufficiently

[1] The translation used here is that of Rudd 1991.

familiar to his audience for them to make the identification for themselves. Described only as *barbarus* (181 – translated here as 'savage'), Xerxes is presented to us, as so often, through a series of symbols illustrative of his arrogance, his despotism and his hybris. Here are all the usual clichés: he turns land into sea and sea into land (Athos is specifically mentioned but the allusion to the Hellespont does not give a name); his armies drink dry the rivers on their march; he chastises the weather with whips and chains, with Poseidon (the Earth-shaker) and the winds (Eurus and Corus) being treated like slaves; and finally he returns home, defeated and humiliated, with his entire navy now represented by a single ship and surrounded by the corpses of his vast force.

So deeply had the image of Xerxes, received from the Greek tradition, penetrated the consciousness of his world by this point that Juvenal clearly felt that he could utilise the theme without any doubt that his readers would recognise the significance of the reversal of fortune to which he alludes in his poetic treatment of the dangers of excessive ambition. Xerxes features alongside other well-known examples – Sejanus, Hannibal, and Alexander the Great – to illustrate Juvenal's point that the higher one climbs, the further one has to fall. His satirical usage of the figure of the Persian king acknowledges too that the theme is by now a hackneyed topic; he refers to the lies of Greek history *(quidquid Graecia mendax / audet in historia*, 174-5), with the implication that the story is a greatly exaggerated version of what really happened. His reference to Sostratus appears to relate to the over-dramatisation of the tale of Xerxes' invasion by poets and orators. The words translated here as 'with soaking pinions' (*madidis...alis*, 178) have been variously interpreted to mean either 'with sweating armpits' (as

suggested by the scholiast on this line), or 'with drunken inspiration'.[2] Whatever the correct translation, Juvenal seems to indicate that this particular interpreter of Xerxes' story exerted himself in declaiming on the theme.[3] We are reminded here of Timotheus' exertions as citharode in performing his dramatic, poetic adaptations of Xerxes' invasion in the late fifth century BC; it would seem that the theme, with its potential for such display, had not lost its appeal by Juvenal's time.

Juvenal was not the first Roman writer to recognise the banality of the Xerxes-narrative. Propertius, writing in the first century BC, had noted that Xerxes' invasion was a literary commonplace: commenting upon his reasons for writing love poetry he adds that, if his Muse would let him sing of wars, he would sing of Caesar's glory rather than of Titans fighting gods, or of the giants' attempt to attack heaven by piling up the mountains, or Thebes, or Troy, or 'the union of two seas at Xerxes' command' (*Elegy* 2.1.22), or of Remus or Carthage. The very fact that Xerxes features in this list of possible stock-themes for poetry suggests that even as early as the first century BC certain learned Romans were beginning to imply that the topic had already been overused. Later, at the beginning of the first century AD, Manilius, in his *Astronomica*, explained his choice of theme by commenting that he was not going to base his work upon the old, well-worn themes, such as the Trojan War, the seven against Thebes, Oedipus or Alexander the Great. 'Nor', he commented, 'shall I tell of the Persian declaration of war upon

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[2] For a summary of these views, see Ferguson 1979, *ad loc*, who suggests that the reference to 'dripping wings' may also allude to the myth of Icarus: 'Sostratus, who is not otherwise known, was too high-flying, and came a flop' (p. 266).

[3] Thomson 1951 identifies the Sostratus named here with the Sosistratus referred to by Aristotle (*Poetics* 1462a) as a showy declaimer who used excessive gesticulation when speaking. On declamatory exhibitionism in this period, see below, pp. 239-40.

the deep, when the sea was hidden by a vast fleet, and a channel was let into the land, and a road made on the waves of the sea' (*Astronomica* 3.19-21). As in Juvenal's stance on the Persian invasion, Xerxes is again thought to be well enough known that his deeds will be recognised without even mentioning his name. Once more the story of his alteration of the land and the sea features as a common, indeed trite, theme, along with other familiar stories from Greek history and myth.[4]

Just as the orators of Athens in the fourth century BC had come to realise that Xerxes needed no introduction, and that his exploits were an easily employable oratorical theme (as seen in Chapter Four above), these poets too demonstrate that the Persian king was a well-known, and indeed overused, subject for literature.[5] The difference here, however, is that this time the words were written in Latin and issued from the pens of writers who lived not in Athens at a time when the memory of the Persian Wars was still fresh, but in a country which was geographically distant, with no involvement in the wars against Xerxes and chronologically remote from the events to which they alluded. The apparent popularity of the Xerxes-theme begs the question, in the first instance, of how Roman audiences came to be so familiar with the Persian Wars topos. Before going on to illustrate the particular uses of the image of Xerxes in Roman writing

[4] For a contemporary Greek perspective on the overuse of the Persian Wars theme in oratory, see below, p. 236, on Lucian.

[5] The recognition of the triteness of the Xerxes-topos in Latin literature had surprising longevity; as late as the fifth century AD the Gallo-Roman poet Sidonius, in his poem *To Felix* (9.38-49) asserted that he intended to avoid the old clichés, including, 'how Xerxes, when he had raised a thousand thousand men, was puffed up by their numbers, or how he was still thirsty when deep rivers had been drunk dry; or of Thermopylae and how, scorning the barriers of land and sea, he rode with his mad troops over the waves of Helle, let into Athos waves that rose almost to the summit of the leafy Alp, and went with a fleet through the channel he had cut.'

I shall first consider the broader significance of Greek history and the Persian Wars tradition at Rome.

Greek history at Rome

Roman involvement with Greece can be dated back to the Macedonian Wars of the third and second centuries BC, when Rome's sphere of influence extended to include much of the eastern Mediterranean.[6] These wars and the systems of patronage which were subsequently built up by Romans throughout the Greek world brought about an increased familiarity with Greek culture and history; although the Romans could now view themselves as supreme in military matters, Greek literature exercised a profound influence over them. Wardman (1976, pp. 74-8 in particular) has shown that the Romans perceived there to be a gap in their culture with the need for a literature to commemorate what they saw as the superior achievements of their own people, just as Greece's glorious past was remembered in the Greek language. He writes (p. 175):

> Men were not induced by stories of the Persian Wars to investigate the facts for themselves. They were, perhaps understandably, wearied by the reiteration of facts and legends from long ago...Romans had their own stories of earlier Rome, which confirmed their idea that they were morally superior, and they thought that their history would look more magnificent than that of Greece if only the style and literary technique of Greek historians could be adapted into a Latin form.

[6] Wardman 1976, pp. x-xiii.

From the belief in the excellence of their own military history stemmed the Roman idea that Greek writers, with their superior literary style, often exaggerated the importance of events in their own past; it is in such a context that Juvenal's claim about the lies told by Greek history should be seen. Florus' *Epitome* of Roman history, for example, written under Hadrian in the second century AD, was quick to point out that the Athenians need not be too boastful about their own past; he reminded his readers of the Syrian war against King Antiochus,[7] and declared that this war was more formidable than those of the Greeks against Darius and Xerxes (1.24.2), when, he declares sceptically, 'impassable mountains were said to have been cut through and the sea covered with sails'; Florus later asserts that in Antiochus the Romans had defeated their Xerxes (1.24.13; he also compares Aemilius Paullus to Alcibiades and says that at Ephesus the Romans fought their own Salamis[8]).

The writers of Latin literature, then, perhaps unsurprisingly, were largely uninterested in Greek history in its own right although the Greek literature which dealt with the past was of interest as models for Latin writing. Style thus became more important than content where Roman literary emulation of the Greeks was concerned. That is not to say, however, that Greek history was shelved

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[7] The Seleucid king Antiochus III had first come into confrontation with the Roman republic when he invaded Thrace in the early second century BC. A series of diplomatic exchanges (196-193 BC) brought no resolution, and Antiochus eventually invaded Greece itself. He was defeated by the Romans in two land battles, at Thermopylae (191 BC) and at Magnesia in Asia Minor (190 BC). The fact that Thermopylae had again become the scene of confrontation with an eastern invader naturally suggested parallels with the first Persian Wars (cf. below on Plutarch, pp. 256-7); fragments of the second-century BC Latin poet Ennius seem to suggest that parallels between Antiochus' invasion and that of Xerxes were being made very soon after the event (see below, p. 216, n. 41).

[8] Spawforth 1994, p. 243 notes that Ephesus was 'an obscure naval engagement which Appian presents as a Roman defeat' (Appian, *Syrian Wars* 24). The battle took place in 190 BC, and the Roman general Pausimachus was, according to Appian, outwitted by Antiochus' admiral Polyxenidas – a reversal of Themistocles' cunning entrapment of Xerxes at Salamis!

altogether. As Florus shows, the Greek past could be used, if nothing else, as a yardstick against which to measure the Romans' superior military achievements. Greek history was also drawn upon as a theme for Roman rhetorical practice;[9] the Persian Wars and Alexander the Great in particular provided ideal themes for exercises in declamation although historical 'fact' was of little concern as orators felt free to adapt the events of history for the purposes of their rhetoric. Roman patronage enabled Greeks to visit and also to settle in the capital of the empire, and by the end of the first century BC, after the upheavals of the civil war had subsided, Greek men of letters – such as Strabo and Dionysius – began to integrate themselves into the culture and society of Rome, bringing with them, of course, the knowledge of their homeland's past. It was in such a context that Xerxes and his expedition to Greece came to find its way into the Roman psyche – not as a subject of interest *per se*, but as one of many themes (along with, for example, the Trojan War and Alexander the Great) of the literature which learned Romans now sought to emulate. When the Romans adopted Greek history, then, the Persian Wars were, for the most part, simply one aspect of that history among many others; Xerxes' invasion did not have the emotional resonances which it had retained for the Greeks.

The Persian Wars as a theme for imperial propaganda

In spite of the general lack of interest in incorporating extensive tales from the Greek past into Rome's own historical literature, as Spawforth (1994, p. 233) has noted, the survival of the 'multi-cultural conquest state' of Rome 'depended on

[9] Cicero (*De officiis* 1.61) commented that in his day the teachers of rhetoric drew on the likes of Marathon, Salamis, Plataea, Thermopylae and Leuctra for their exercises.

the creation of political consensus between rulers and subjects'; one way of doing this was to use what he refers to as 'shared symbols', ways of forging a common identity for rulers and subjects. As a result certain Greek traditions became incorporated into Roman ideology. In this way the Persian Wars motif, which had remained a key aspect of the Greeks' cultural identity, became, in a sense, a part of Roman imperial propaganda.

Even in the early stages of Rome's domination of Greece an awareness of Greek historical sensitivities had been necessary on the part of the ruling power. Gruen (1984, pp. 132-57) has shown the significance for the Romans of asserting throughout the Republican period that they were maintaining the 'freedom of the Greeks'; Flamininus, after his victory over the Macedonians under Philip V in 196 BC, had announced at the Isthmian Games that the Greeks were now to be free, ungarrisoned, without tribute, and free to govern themselves in accordance with their ancestral laws.[10] The proclamation, as Gruen has shown, was not a part of traditional Roman practice but instead followed Greek models, echoing Hellenistic rulers' emotional appeals to Greek freedom as part of their propaganda in the struggles for power following the death of Alexander the Great. Gruen does not point out, however, that the emotional weight of such appeals to Greek freedom can be traced back to the period of the Persian Wars; those wars had always been seen as struggles to retain Hellenic liberty in the face of the enslavement threatened by Persia. The Greeks themselves clearly made this connection; Gruen does note (p. 147, n. 88) that in an epigram by Alcaeus of Messene, Flamininus himself, as liberator of the Greeks from the Macedonian

[10] Polybius 18.46.5. Cf. Plutarch, *Flamininus* 10.10.3-5.

threat, was contrasted with Xerxes, the enslaver of the past (*Anth. Pal.* 16.5).[11] Once the Romans had recognised the value of this 'freedom' motif, they continued to use it as propaganda in their relations with Greece.[12]

By the advent of the Empire in the first century BC, Greece and Rome had become so interrelated that Roman imperial propaganda could easily draw, both explicitly and implicitly, upon the Persian Wars motif as a way of creating and maintaining a shared identity. In one aspect of Roman ideology in particular – an exceptional case – the Greeks' past wars with Persia came to take on a contemporary resonance. During the later republican and early imperial periods, the monarchy of Parthia, homeland of the ancient Persians, continued to resist Roman domination; in the Roman imagination Parthian resistance became equated with the fifth-century Achaemenid invasions of Greece. Even as early as 57 BC, Cicero had referred to the Parthians as *Persae* (*De domo sua* 60); the equation continued to be made in Latin literature, with Horace in particular repeatedly referring in his *Odes* to anti-Parthian campaigns and describing the enemy as 'Medes' or 'Persians' rather than 'Parthians'.[13]

Spawforth (1994, pp. 237-40) has documented eight instances, including Augustus' naumachia of 2 BC and Caligula's bridge of boats in AD 39 (see below pp. 200-204), in which Parthians were apparently presented as the reincarnation

[11] On this epigram, see Walbank 1943, p. 2.
[12] Gruen 1984 discusses the relevant examples at pp. 151-6.
[13] Campbell 1924, p. 104 and p. 110.

of the Persians.[14] An inscription[15] from the Parthenon at Athens honouring the emperor Nero appears to suggest that the Greeks too came to view the Parthians in similar terms. Carroll 1982, pp. 65-74 (cf. Spawforth 1994, pp. 234-7) suggested that the context of this inscription was Nero's war with Parthia over control of Armenia (AD 61/2) and that, by placing an honorary inscription in the Parthenon, the Athenians associated this new campaign with the victories over the eastern enemy of the past which were commemorated on the acropolis.[16] This association of the Parthians with the Greeks' old enemies was one way in which the Greeks were encouraged to identify themselves with the Romans in the 'them and us' polarity;[17] as Bowersock (1990, p. 174) has pointed out, 'If the government at Rome were interested in presenting itself as the defender of the Hellenic tradition, nothing would be more compelling than the celebration of Rome as protector of the Greeks against the present menace in the Iranian heartland.' Greeks and Romans were, ideologically, on the same side, as opposed to the barbarians whom the Parthians represented.[18]

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[14] Spawforth 1994, p. 245: 'Intentionally or not, imperial ideology played on the old ethnocentrism of the Greeks, and it may well be here that the real strength of the Persian wars as a unifying symbol should be sought, especially since the Romans themselves, as they came into contact with the 'uncivilized' peoples on their frontiers, Parthians included, in due course constructed their own brand of 'barbarology' on Greek lines.'

[15] *IG* ii² 3277 = Sherk 1988 no. 78.

[16] Spawforth 1994, p. 237: 'The Athenian gesture reveals a characteristically Greek way of comprehending the Parthians, by equating them with the Persian bogeymen of the Classical past and, in this case, literally inscribing them into local historical tradition.'

[17] An Athenian inscription hailing Julius Nicanor as the 'new Themistocles' when he bought back the island of Salamis for Athens demonstrates that it was indeed possible for Romans to be viewed as 'honorary Greeks'; it was a high honour to be associated with the hero of Salamis. On the identity of Nicanor and the circumstances of the dedication, see Jones 1978, pp. 222-8. The date of the episode is disputed, having taken place either during the reign of Augustus (preferred by Jones), or in AD 61/2.

[18] Hardie (1997) has shown too how Augustan literature reworked the fifth-century Athenian imagery of barbarism and came to apply it to the external, eastern threats to Rome in this period. Not only do the Parthians feature here as the eastern enemy, but the threat posed by Cleopatra is also formulated in terms of the Athenian symbolism relating to barbarian others, especially that of the Amazon woman (pp. 52-3). He writes in relation to the Persian Wars theme that in the period after the civil war, 'there may be grounds for suspecting that that original model held an especial attraction for Romans in the 30s and 20s B.C., offering as it did a myth of new beginnings and fresh power after a conflict almost fatal to the survival itself of the state.'

This usage of the Persian Wars tradition manifested itself, on occasion, with particular splendour at Rome. In 2 BC Augustus staged a *naumachia*, or naval battle,[19] in an excavated site across the Tiber. Coleman (1993) has shown how such spectacles came to be a key part of Roman imperial propaganda; the themes may differ[20] but the principle was the same – 'the ambition to match, if not surpass, the achievements of one's predecessors' (p. 68). Augustus himself described the spectacle of 2 BC in detail in his *Res Gestae* (23) where he mentions that thirty triremes were included in the fleet of warships and that three thousand men participated. Cassius Dio (55.9.7) adds the detail that the opposing sides in the mock-battle were called 'Athenians' and 'Persians' and says that 'on this occasion too the Athenians won'; the parallel with Salamis could not be clearer.

Various explanations have been suggested for Augustus' choice of theme on this particular occasion. Ovid (*Ars Amatoria* 1.171-2) relates the show to his panegyric of Gaius Caesar on the eve of his departure for a new eastern expedition, warning at *Ars Am.* 1.177-84 that the Romans will be avenged against the Parthians, and will conquer the East. The *naumachia* has thus been thought to assert on a grand scale the link between the Parthian enemy and the

[19] Coleman 1993, p. 73 advocates the avoidance of the term 'mock naval battle' because, 'although these conflicts were not taking place in an actual theatre of war, they were in grim earnest in the sense that people were meant to get killed'.

[20] Attested themes of *naumachiae* include, as well as those relating to Salamis, Caesar's presentation of 'Tyrians' and 'Egyptians' in 46 BC, Claudius' battle of 'Sicilians' and 'Rhodians', and Titus' AD 80 staging of 'Corcyra versus Corinth' and 'Athens versus Syracuse' (these *naumachiae* featured as part of a series of aquatic displays which also included a re-enactment of the myth of Hero and Leander, a display by 'pantomime' Nereids, and a chariot race apparently run in the water). See Coleman 1993, pp. 60–7 for extended discussion of Titus' aquatic displays.

Persians against whom the Greeks fought in the past.[21] Zanker, meanwhile (1988, p. 84), has suggested that Augustus was drawing a parallel between Actium – his own victory over an eastern threat as represented by Antony and Cleopatra – and the Athenian victory over the Persians at Salamis. Whatever the motive in propaganda terms, the very fact that Salamis was still perceived as a suitable topic for such spectacle demonstrates that the dramatic possibilities of the Salamis theme retained their appeal; 'Athenians versus Persians' was still a familiar enough story for it to have crowd-pulling impact at Rome at this time. The theme was later re-used by Nero in his *naumachia* of AD 57 or 58 when, Dio tells us (61.9.5), this emperor flooded a theatre and stocked it with fish and other marine creatures; he enacted a naval battle of 'Athenians against Persians' (cf. Suetonius *Nero* 12.1). As Spawforth (1994, p. 238) has pointed out this too coincided with an eastern war – Nero launched an Armenian war in the winter of 57/8.

One other event of particular significance for our purposes was Caligula's construction of a bridge of boats across the Bay of Naples at Baiae, which formed part of a grandiose spectacle apparently staged in AD 39 shortly before Caligula was to depart on an expedition to Gaul and Germany. The event is described by Cassius Dio (59.17.1-11) and Suetonius (*Caligula* 19); Josephus too

[21] See Bowersock 1990, p. 174. Hannestad 1986, pp. 53-4, demonstrates how Augustus' diplomatic negotiations in 20 BC, as a result of which the Parthians returned the standards seized from the Romans during the eastern campaigns at the time of the civil war, were presented in imperial propaganda as a military victory. Through the association of Gaius' new campaign with the Greek victory over the Persians this stance of military dominance could be maintained. Cassius Dio (59.40.5) links the *naumachia* with the celebrations for the consecration of a new temple of Mars Ultor ('Avenger'), which also reflected the aggressive air of the propaganda relating to the Parthians.

gives the bridge a brief mention (*AJ* 19.5-6).[22] Apparently Caligula had a double line of merchant ships anchored together with a mound of earth piled upon them to make it look like the Appian Way; the emperor then rode back and forth over the bridge for two days. On the first day he rode upon a horse, whilst wearing a crown of oak leaves, a cloak of gold cloth, and the breastplate of Alexander; he also made sacrifices to Neptune and Envy. On the second day Caligula was mounted on a chariot. This time he had with him a Parthian hostage named Darius, and was attended by the Praetorian Guard along with some of his friends riding in Gallic chariots. The emperor is said to have made a speech boasting that he had performed an unexampled achievement. In the evening, the bay was lit by flares from the hillside; as Balsdon notes (1934, p. 52), 'The sea had been turned into land; so now the night was made day.'

As with Augustus' Salamis *naumachia* various explanations for Caligula's behaviour have been suggested, this time by the ancient sources as well as their modern interpreters. Josephus (*AJ* 19.5) suggests that the emperor simply thought it tedious to cross the bay of Baiae in a trireme. Moreover, he expected as 'master of the sea' that the sea ought to offer to him the same service as the land (*AJ* 19.6). Dio, meanwhile (59.17.1), suggests that it was a display of arrogance, and that Caligula thought it an easy matter to drive one's chariot over land, so instead he wanted to drive it over the sea. Suetonius offers a range of suggestions (*Caligula* 19.2), saying that most people thought that the aim was to rival Xerxes (*aemulatione Xerxis*); Dio too asserts at 59.17.11 that Caligula boasted that he had bridged a far greater expanse of sea than either Xerxes or Darius had done.

[22] Barrett 1989, pp. 211-12 summarises the sources for the bridge and lists the conflicting opinions concerning its purpose.

Other possibilities suggested by Suetonius are that Caligula wanted to inspire fear in Germany and Britain or that he wanted to prove wrong a prediction of Thrasyllus that 'Gaius would no more be Emperor than he would drive his horses across the bay of Baiae'.[23]

Balsdon (1934, pp. 53-4) has suggested that the reference to imitation of Xerxes holds the key to the truth here. He argues, in keeping with the association of Parthia and Persia in imperial Roman ideology, that the display was aimed in particular at demonstrating Roman power to Parthian hostages present in Rome, including the hostage Darius, son of the Parthian king Artabanus; the associations of this hostage's name would not escape anyone familiar with the first Persian invasion of Greece. As Barrett (1989, p. 212) has pointed out, however, we need not necessarily seek a rational explanation for this behaviour. He writes that, 'Caligula would not have been the first autocratic ruler to prove his manhood by grandiose construction'.

Far more significant for the present discussion is surely the fact that the sources for Caligula's reign thought this apparent association between the emperor and Xerxes worthy of comment. The literary tradition has been universally hostile towards Caligula; Kleijwegt (1994, p. 652) refers to him as 'the codified stereotype of the imperial tyrant of historiography'. The association with Xerxes, himself a codified tyrannical stereotype, is clearly a part of the negative verdict of the biographical sources (as represented here by both Greek and Latin sources

[23] Malloch 2001 adds the possibility that Caligula was attempting to imitate Alexander. For other examples of emperors who consciously associated themselves with the Macedonian conqueror, see also Hannestad 1986, p. 170 (Trajan), p. 284 (Caracalla), p. 316 (Galerius) and p. 327 (Constantine).

– Dio and Suetonius) relating to Caligula. The association of such excess and extravagance with Xerxes is also seen elsewhere in the Roman tradition. Lucan, in his *De bello civili* (2.670-9), for example, made an elaborate comparison of Caesar's siege-works constructed at Brundisium with Xerxes' building activities at the Hellespont and Athos.[24] The proverbial luxury of Lucullus in relation to his alteration of land and sea was also expressed by Velleius Paterculus (2.33.4), who tells us that, as a result of this excessive behaviour, Pompey used to refer to Lucullus as *Xerxes togatus*, 'Xerxes in a toga'.[25]

These references to Xerxes within the Persian Wars tradition clearly suggest that the old associations of the Persian king were not substantially altered in the Roman tradition; the Persian king retained his identity as a paradigm of extreme behaviour and excessive luxury. An analysis of Roman literary sources will now provide an insight into the specific nature of Xerxes' reception from the late Republic and into the imperial period. Although the majority of these sources are written in Latin it is first necessary to deal with two authors writing in Greek but resident at Rome in the latter part of the first century BC. Greek men of letters were an essential part of the cultural scene in Rome after the conquest of the Greek world; most were attached to eminent Roman families. After the civil war in the mid-first century BC there was a renewed migration of Greeks to the capital of the empire.[26] Two such Greeks who made their way to Rome in the

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[24] *De bello civili* 672-3: *Tales fama canit tumidum super aequora Persen / construxisse uias* ('Such a road did the proud Persian construct over the sea, as fame reports'). Fantham 1992, p. 212 comments here on the 'exceptional application of *tumidum* not to swollen waters…but to the overreach of the monarch pitting his power against the waters'.

[25] Pliny (*NH* 9.170) too relates that Pompey used to call Lucullus *Xerxes togatus*. In Plutarch's Greek version (*Lucullus* 39.2-3), however, it is Tubero the Stoic who uses the expression. See Edwards 1993, pp. 145-6. Jolivet (1987) discusses Lucullus' building activities in detail.

[26] Bowersock 1965, pp. 123-4, identifies some of the prominent Greek writers present at Rome after 30 BC.

calm after the storm of civil war were Strabo of Amasia, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Both lived and worked in Rome from around 30 BC onwards. Their work, written under the patronage of prominent Romans, was thus linked, both chronologically and geographically, with the work of Latin authors writing at this time; works written in Greek at this time are also clearly important as one of the means by which Greek traditions were disseminated among a Roman audience. Both Strabo and Dionysius professed to be writing for the education of Romans;[27] yet, as both were writing in the Greek language, they could not neglect the needs of their fellow Greeks.

Strabo's Xerxes and the geography of Greece

The geographer and historiographer Strabo had left Asia Minor to settle in Rome in 29 BC, having already visited the city several times before; there he had close links with the Roman elite, accompanying the prefect Aulus Gellius on his Egyptian expedition in the mid-20s BC. The writer was therefore very much between the Greek and Roman worlds; as his *Geography* shows, the world now dominated by Rome was still in many ways defined by the Greek traditions which had shaped it.[28] Although Strabo was first and foremost a historian his *History* is no longer extant, so we are left to deduce his presentation of Xerxes from what survives of his *Geography*. In describing the physical features of the

[27] Strabo *Geography* 1.1.22 asserts that he is providing practical wisdom for statesmen and the public alike (but not for the wholly uneducated); Dionysius 1.6.3-4 gives the aim of his work as the immortalisation of the deeds of great (Roman) men, to provide an example for the noble descendants of such men.

[28] Clarke 1999, p. 334: 'The *Geography* perfectly illustrates that the world which Strabo knew, and was trying to describe, was Roman in name and political power, but could not be conceptualized and depicted except through recourse to the Greek historiographical and geographical traditions, which still dominated mental maps of the world and reflected the reality of the past, which had been transformed into the present.'

principal countries of the Roman world Strabo also details their history and customs where relevant. Of Greek history Clarke (1999, p. 300) notes:

> The fifth century was more important for Strabo than any other period since the Trojan war and the associated migrations and colonizations. But almost all of the fifth-century material in the *Geography* is focused on Xerxes and the Persian invasions of Europe, and not on Athens and Sparta. A successful Persian invasion would have had serious implications for the way the world looked in all senses – political, urban, and ethnic.[29]

Strabo's selection of material where Xerxes is concerned is thus determined very much by his overarching literary project; this is our first extant source where geography is accorded particular importance in relation to the expedition of the Persians in 480/479 BC. In a sense, then, Strabo's work can be seen to foreshadow Pausanias' later treatment of the Persian king[30] although Pausanias' work is perhaps more strictly 'geographical' in the modern sense.[31]

Strabo maintained the traditional Greek division of the world into 'Greeks' and 'barbarians', although, as Dueck (2000, p. 75) has pointed out, Romans – whilst viewed as culturally inferior to the Greeks – feature, as in the Roman ideology discussed above, on the 'Greek' side of this distinction. Within Strabo's discussion of the geography of the Greece of his day, Xerxes features at the relevant points, appearing not as a figure thought worthy of examination in

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[29] Of course, *Roman* domination had had similar effects upon the geography of the known world. Nicolet (1991, pp. 95-123 in particular) has demonstrated the Roman concern for measuring and controlling geographical space, as seen most obviously in the production of Agrippa's map.

[30] On Pausanias see below, pp. 267-78.

[31] Clarke 1999, p. 195, points out that the ancient notion of the terms γεωγραφία and ἱστορία both incorporated aspects of the modern subjects of geography and history: 'in other words...separable subjects of geography and history, as defined in the narrow, modern sense, do not map exactly into the ancient world.'

his own right, but simply where reference to his actions is deemed useful in enhancing the reader's understanding of the geographical significance of particular areas. In what remains of his seventh book, Strabo mentions, for example, Xerxes' canal near Mount Athos, telling us that the king brought his fleet across from the Strymonic Gulf through the isthmus there (Fr. 7.35, cf. Fr. 7.33, where Acanthus is described as being 'on the coast near Xerxes' canal'); Strabo adds that Demetrius of Scepsis does not believe that the canal was navigable and goes on to explain why, in technical terms. Doriscus is described as the place where Xerxes counted his army (Fr. 7.47), we are told of Herodotus' claim that the Melas river was insufficient to supply Xerxes' army (Fr. 7.51), and Cape Sestias is 'where the yoke/bridge of Xerxes was' (καθ' ἣν τὸ Ξέρξου ζεῦγμα, Fr. 7.55). The king's bridge is also mentioned in the context of the Asian section of the *Geography* at 13.1.22, where Strabo points out the boundary between Europe and Asia, described as 'the seven stades, which was yoked/bridged by Xerxes' (τὸ ἑπταστάδιον, ὅπερ ἔζευξε Ξέρξης).

In all of these cases only the bare details are given, indicating that Strabo trusts in his readers' awareness of the events to which he alludes. He clearly has no interest here in providing historical analysis of the course of the second Persian invasion. We can only speculate as to what may have been said of Xerxes in his *History*, but, where the literary project of the *Geography* is concerned, lengthy expositions of historical causation or clichéd eulogistic proclamations of the Greeks' triumph over barbarian invaders fall outside the sphere of his study. Rather, Strabo's references to Xerxes show that his one of his primary concerns here was to look at the ways in which the Persian king had altered – or at least

attempted to alter – the physical appearance of the Greek world (temporarily or permanently), whether by building a bridge, digging a canal, or draining a river in order to provide drinking water for his troops.

Where Strabo's treatment of Salamis is concerned his comments about Xerxes reflect a similar interest in relating only the salient points of the story which are relevant to his literary project. Initially he tells us that the fame of the island is due to the Aiacidae who ruled over it (Ajax himself is also singled out for a mention here) and also to the fact that near it Xerxes was defeated by the Greeks in a naval battle here, and fled to his homeland (9.1.9). The ignominy of the defeat is given no attention beyond this brief comment, suggesting that, whilst the motif of Xerxes' dramatic reversal of fortune had penetrated through to Strabo's own time, he was uninterested in passing moral judgements which had already been made many times before.

No more details of the actual battle are given, but Strabo does comment a little later (9.1.13) upon Xerxes' attempt to build a mole across to Salamis from the mainland; he tells us that the plan was thwarted by the naval battle and the Persian flight.[32] This is another clear instance in which Xerxes was seen to have attempted to alter the geography of Greece, yet we might consider here too the effects of Greek geography upon the outcome of the Persian expedition. Although Strabo gives no indication of the technical aspects of the battle of Salamis we might well wonder here whether he was familiar with the main

[32] Strabo here agrees with Ctesias (*FGrH* 688 F 13.30 (26)) in placing the attempt to build the mole *before* the battle; Herodotus, however, had said that the attempt was made *after* the battle (8.97.1).

tactical reason for Xerxes' defeat – the narrowness of the strait in which his huge navy was outmanoeuvred by the smaller Greek fleet. If this were the case (and his apparent familiarity with Herodotus, as noted in connection with Xerxes at 7 Fr. 51, would suggest that it is likely) then we could posit here a potential connection between geographical features and the course of history.

At the very beginning of his *Geography* (1.1.17) Strabo had asserted the significance of a knowledge of geography for military men and given a series of illustrative examples of military success and failure to illuminate his point. Two of these related to Xerxes' expedition: the errors made by Xerxes' commanders, and the wrecks in which this resulted, and Ephialtes' knowledge of the pass at Thermopylae which enabled the Persians to defeat Leonidas. The effects of physical geography upon events also come into play in the course of Strabo's discussion of Cape Sepias (9.5.22). The place, he tells us, is celebrated in tragedies and song because it was there that the Persian fleet was destroyed by a storm (it may well be that it was this incident which Strabo had in mind when he referred in his preface to the errors made by Xerxes' fleet). When the fleet of Xerxes was berthed at Casthanaea at the foot of Pelion a violent wind drove some of the ships onto the beach where they were wrecked, whilst others were carried along the rugged coast and destroyed too. Again, the lie of the land is itself responsible in part for the fate of Xerxes' ships.

Other scattered references to Xerxes in Strabo's work refer primarily to his redistribution of territory which might well be thought of as large-scale alterations of the 'world map'. Strabo reminds us of Themistocles' involvement

with the Persian king,[33] telling us that Xerxes gave to Themistocles three Asian cities – Myus to supply him with fish, Magnesia for his bread and Lampsacus for wine (14.1.10, cf. 13.1.12 where Lampsacus is also mentioned as being a gift from Xerxes to Themistocles).[34] This carving up of the landscape and distribution of it as a means of benefaction is one of the ways in which the tyrant symbolically makes his mark upon the very earth itself. We might compare here the way in which elsewhere (in Herodotus' account in particular) Xerxes is seen marking and mutilating human bodies as a way of asserting his ownership of them (see above, p. 70); just as he treats all people as slaves, so the land is treated here as his possession, to be carved up and redistributed at will.

Elsewhere (11.11.4), we are told too that Xerxes gave the Branchidae a city because they had betrayed to him the riches of the god at Didyma. The story is elaborated upon at 14.1.5, where Strabo relates that Xerxes set on fire the oracle of Apollo Didymeus along with other temples there, and the Branchidae, in whose territory the oracle was, gave the treasures of Apollo's temple to the king and then accompanied him in his flight to escape punishment for their actions.[35] This incident combines the motif of land redistribution with alteration of the physical appearance of a place; the burning of the oracle of Apollo, although outwardly a much smaller-scale change than the reapportionment of whole cities, is of course highly significant as a representation of Xerxes' hybris. His

[33] Note that it is unlikely that Themistocles actually dealt with Xerxes, but that he probably came to the court of Artaxerxes. See above, pp. 169-70, for discussion of this point.
[34] The giving of Lampsacus to Themistocles as a gift is mentioned much later in the Roman tradition in the fourth-century AD work of Ammianus Marcellinus (22.8.4); in his discussion of the geography of the Aegean Ammianus also mentions the bridge of Xerxes at Abydus here.
[35] The Branchidae are also mentioned by Strabo at 17.1.43 as having 'persised' in the time of Xerxes (ἐπὶ Ξέρξου περσισάντων).

disrespect for other religions is symbolised too by the story of his demolition of the tomb of Belus at Babylon (16.1.5); it is surely significant that the anecdotes concerning Xerxes which have lasted tend to be those relating to his hybris. In perpetrating this kind of destruction, it seems, Xerxes was following in his father's footsteps; Strabo tells us elsewhere (13.1.22) that Darius, 'father of Xerxes' (τοῦ Ξέρξου πατρός) burned Abydus and other cities.[36]

Strabo's treatment of Xerxes is thus limited to a selection of material relevant to the effect of the king's actions upon the physical appearance of the locations he chooses to discuss, or, conversely, to the way in which physical geography affected the course of the invasion, as seen at Salamis and Sepias in particular. The image of Xerxes as hybristic and sacrilegious destroyer persists here and we are given glimpses too of the tyrant's alteration of the natural state of things, which elsewhere goes hand in hand with the picture of Xerxes as enslaver even of nature itself. Strabo makes no explicit moral judgements; generations of literary renderings of the Xerxes-story had already done that for him and so his interest lay primarily in the effects, potential or actual, of Xerxes' invasion upon the lands which he described for both Greek and Roman readers.

Xerxes as a point of reference: Dionysius

Resident in Rome at the same time as Strabo, Dionysius, like his contemporary, asserted that his major work, the *Roman Antiquities*, an account of the rise of

[36] This association of Xerxes with his father is more in line with Herodotus' approach than that of Aeschylus, who presents Xerxes' activities as breaking with the precedents set by Darius. On Herodotus' treatment of the father-son relationship see above, pp. 90-4; on that of Aeschylus, pp. 44-7.

Rome from its beginnings to the First Punic War, was designed to benefit Roman readers; he claimed in his preface that he wished to provide noble Romans of the present day with instructive examples of ancient Roman virtue in the past (1.6.3-4). As he too was writing in Greek, his Greek-speaking audience must not be forgotten. He claims (1.4.2) that one of his reasons for writing is Greek ignorance of the early history of Rome and notes (1.5.4) that, until now, no accurate history of Rome had been written in the Greek language. Moreover, Dionysius attempted to secure the sympathy of his Greek audience by asserting that Rome was really a Greek city in origin (1.5.1).[37] He also preserved the familiar Greek/barbarian antithesis, but, like Strabo, saw the Romans as being on the Greek side of the dichotomy; Bowersock (1965, 131) has offered the observation that 'Dionysius' perpetuation of the old contrast between barbarians and Hellenes does not show him in an anti-Roman mood: just the opposite, for Romans were to be numbered among the Hellenes.'

As we might expect, Dionysius' history of Rome shows little interest in the details of Xerxes' story, but the work is informative for the insight which it offers into the continued use of Xerxes' expedition as a means of relative dating. Where Thucydides could date events in fifth-century Greek history in relation to the second Persian invasion[38] and Polybius later put Xerxes' invasion side by side with Roman history as a means of conceptualizing the latter for his Greek

[37] Wiseman 1979, p. 154-5, notes other examples similar to this 'hellenization' of Rome; he cites the Alexandrian scholar Philoxenus' treatise on the Roman language as a dialect of Greek, and the Greek elegiac poets Simylos and Butas who used Roman legends and traditions in the manner of Callimachus.

[38] See, for example, Thuc. 1.118.2, where he tells us that the events which he has just described took place in the fifty years between Xerxes' retreat and the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.

readers[39] Dionysius continued the trend. The opening of his work uses a comparison with Persia as a means of glorifying Roman imperialism; there (1.2.2) he comments on Roman supremacy and gives examples of other empires which he perceives as inferior. These include the Persians who, he recalls, conquered the Medes and ruled almost the whole of Asia, but when they also tried to subdue the people of Europe they failed, and continued in power for just over two hundred years. By contrast, of course, Roman dominion in Strabo's time stretched throughout Europe and far beyond.

Later in the work Xerxes' expedition is used on one occasion as a means of relative dating; the event is so familiar to Greek readers that it acts as an ideal guide to help them to locate in time the events in Roman history which Dionysius is discussing. For the year 480/79 BC Dionysius gives (9.1.1) the Roman consuls (Caeso Fabius and Spurius Furius), the Olympiad (the seventy-fifth), the name of the Athenian archon (Calliades) and says that the occurrences being recounted took place 'at the time when Xerxes made his expedition against Greece' (καθ' ὃν χρόνον ἐστράτευσε Ξέρξης ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα). In this way he ensures that his Roman readers are able to pinpoint their own history in relation to events in Greece just as the Greek audience will be able to relate Rome's formative years to what was the most significant event in their own past.[40]

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[39] Polybius (3.22.1-2) commented that the first treaty between Rome and Carthage took place twenty-eight years before the crossing of Xerxes into Greece.

[40] For details of a first-century BC attempt in Latin to synchronise Roman and Greek history, see Wiseman 1979, pp. 157-8, on Cornelius Nepos' lost *Chronica*, which apparently augmented the work of the Athenian Apollodorus on Greek history, adding significant Roman events and therefore 'bringing the events of Roman tradition into the mainstream of 'world history' as created by the Greeks'; important Greek events were set side by side with concurrent incidents in the history of Rome. Only fragments of this work by Nepos remain, so we can only speculate as to whether the expedition of Xerxes was included, although this would seem to be a fair assumption in the light of Nepos' familiarity with the Persian Wars, as seen in his biographies (see below, pp. 222-7).

The *Roman Antiquities* provide us with one more significant mention of Xerxes, this time in relation to the author's discussion of his own historical technique. In justifying his method of giving detailed explanation of historical events (11.1.2), he uses the history of the Persian Wars as an example. Most people, he writes, are not satisfied just with hearing that the wars were won by the Athenians and Lacedaemonians, who, in two battles at sea and two on land, overcame the barbarian with his three million troops even though they and their allies had only eleven myriads (one hundred and ten thousand); they also, he asserts, want to know where the actions took place and how they came about, as well as who were the commanders on both sides, and so on. The reference alludes of course to the usual Xerxes-cliché – that his troops outnumbered the Greeks many times over – and reminds us once more of the lasting value of the theme as a reference point for writers whose own subject-matter may seem largely unrelated. In his rhetorical work *On Demosthenes* (one of several treatises on earlier Greek writers), Dionysius had also used an example relating to Xerxes to illustrate a point of his argument. There, in praising the style of Herodotus (*On Demosthenes* 41), he took as an example of Herodotus' success in blending the austere and the pleasant the speech of Xerxes in which the king explains his decision to invade Greece (Hdt. 7.8), and converted it into Attic Greek (a dialect which he and his contemporaries viewed as stylistically superior to the Ionic of Herodotus). This might be seen as the ultimate in ventriloquising Xerxes!

Dionysius' re-appropriation of the Xerxes-tradition in these different ways illustrates the way in which the theme could be reused without any particular

regard for the actual subject-matter of the story. As these examples show, Dionysius clearly had no interest whatsoever in the figure of Xerxes himself; he merely found the familiar topoi relating to the Persian a convenient tool for both literary and historical exposition. The story of Xerxes had by this point rooted itself so deeply in the Greek – and, apparently, the Roman – psyche that in cases such as that of Dionysius the details had become secondary to the rhetorical usage of the example.

The proverbial Persian

In much the same way as Dionysius saw the potential of the Xerxes-theme as an easily recognisable historical example and a point of reference for his readers, a whole range of authors writing in Latin also seized upon the topos as a way of elucidating their own works. Over a wide chronological period, Xerxes found his way into almost every genre of Latin literature, with anecdotes concerning his life and his expedition to Greece being employed to support arguments about literature, history, and human nature, and to clarify moral and philosophical theories. Often such references, as was the case in the works of both Strabo and Dionysius, never develop into an extended discussion of the historical figure to whom they refer but stand alone, mentioned merely in passing. As discussed earlier in this chapter the events of Greek history were of no interest to Romans *per se*, but the familiar topoi could nonetheless be reused as illustrative material. The elder Pliny, for example, provides us with examples of references to Xerxes in his *Natural History* which are comparable to the way in which Strabo mentions the king only in passing in his geographical work. Pliny too discusses

the geography of Greece in the course of his work and singles out for mention Xerxes' canal near Athos (*Nat. Hist.* 4.37) as well as Doriscus, where Xerxes counted his troops (4.43). Later in the work, Xerxes also features in Pliny's discussion of botany; there, in discussing the significance of omens whereby trees turn into a different kind of tree, the writer, in his list of examples, refers to an incident in Laodicea where a plane-tree turned into an olive upon the arrival of Xerxes (17.242). No further comment is given here and we, as readers, are left to make our own assumptions as to the significance of the fact that this omen is related to Xerxes' invasion; Pliny clearly felt that there was no need to elaborate further.

This kind of passing allusion is common in the works of other Latin authors; never do we find a character sketch of Xerxes as detailed even as those of Aeschylus, Herodotus or Timotheus, however artificial these constructs may have been. Sometimes only the briefest of allusions are made, featuring in particular where a quick point of comparison is needed; even in these cases, however, the common topoi from narratives of the Persian expedition recur. Varro, for example, in the first century BC, uses other writers' allusions to the crossing of the Hellespont to make a linguistic point in his *De Lingua Latina* (7.21). There he discusses Cassius' usage of the phrase, *Hellespontum et claustra* and explains the usage of *claustra* ('barriers') by citing Ennius' description of Xerxes' Hellespont bridge.[41] Elsewhere, Cicero sees a potential comparison between the hybristic destruction of Xerxes and the writings of Epicurus; in his

[41] The context of the passage of Ennius referred to by Cicero is not known, although at *Annals* 13.1 the poet also referred to the bridging of the Hellespont in the context of the war against Antiochus. Skutsch 1985, p. 535 comments in relation to this that 'The fragment clearly has to do with apprehension felt at Rome in 192 when war against Antiochus seemed inevitable.'

De natura deorum he writes that where Xerxes overthrew the temples of the immortal gods by force, Epicurus did so by argument (*nec manibus ut Xerxes sed rationibus*). In a completely different vein Frontinus' first-century AD manual on Greek and Roman military stratagems takes examples, perhaps unsurprisingly, from the story of Xerxes' invasion where appropriate. Two of these examples feature the ruses of Themistocles which demonstrate tactical aptitude rather than military might; his pretence to Xerxes that the Greeks were about to flee from Salamis is cited (*Stratagems* 2.2.14), as is his prevention of the Athenians' destruction of the Hellespont bridge and subsequent persuasion of Xerxes to beat a hasty retreat (2.6.8). The familiar contrast of Greek and Persian, seen here in terms of intelligence or lack of it, is elsewhere in Frontinus' work formulated as a 'numbers versus discipline' dichotomy; Xerxes, after his hard-won victory at Thermopylae, is said to have mused that although he had many men he had none who adhered to discipline (4.2.9).

Where the Xerxes-topos proves especially useful for Roman writers, however, is in relation to some of the bigger questions concerning the character of human beings and the nature of mortal existence. In works of a philosophical or discursive nature Xerxes is often the representative of particular negative characteristics. Cicero, for example, in one of his *Tusculan Disputations*, uses Xerxes as a paradigm of greed and excess. He writes (*Tusc.* 5.20):

> Xerxes, although endowed with all of fortune's gifts and rewards, was not content with cavalry nor infantry forces, nor with a vast number of ships, nor with a boundless weight of gold, but offered a reward to anyone who could find a new pleasure. With that he would not have been content; for

lust will never find its limit.

The anecdote is one which we have not yet seen in earlier works discussing Xerxes,[42] but which is based on the familiar premise that Xerxes did nothing in moderation, but all things to excess.

The same assumption forms the basis too of Cicero's allusion to the Xerxes-tradition in his *De finibus* (2.111-12). There, in arguing that man is made for higher ends than pleasure, he describes in detail Xerxes' expedition through recourse to the familiar topoi – the huge fleet and army, the Hellespont bridge and Athos canal (described as walking on sea and sailing on land – *mari ambulauisset, terra nauigauisset*). Cicero goes on to consider how Xerxes might have responded if someone had asked him the reason for all of this, and tells us how absurd it would seem if he were to reply that he simply wanted some honey from Hymettus. This, asserts Cicero, is equivalent to saying that man's only aim in life is the pursuit of pleasure.[43] For Cicero to support his argument concerning the absurdity of such a claim, Xerxes provides a perfect example because of the extreme nature of his actions; the writer is able to use this to present an exaggerated contrast between painstaking endeavour and trivial ends, thus illustrating his point. Obviously, Cicero is not trying to suggest that Xerxes was pursuing trivial ends; rather it is clear to all who know the story that his ultimate aim (as presented by the western sources, at least) was the domination of Greece.

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[42] The same story is, however, repeated later by Valerius Maximus (9.1. ext. 3).

[43] Darius' last words in Aeschylus' *Persae* (840-2) are an injunction to the daily pursuit of pleasure above all. Cicero's use of Xerxes in this context perhaps shows continuing awareness of the play; he was an admirer of Aeschylus, and is known to have translated some of his works – for example the lost *Prometheus Unbound* – into Latin.

Nonetheless, it is significant that he chooses the Persian king as the best example of human excess that he can call to mind.[44]

Similarly, the younger Seneca found a role for the familiar image of Xerxes in some of his moral essays. His treatise on anger, for example, looks at the actions of both Darius and Xerxes as illustrative of the ferocity of barbarian kings. There (*De ira* 3.16.3-4) he relates, first, the story of Darius' treatment of Oeobazus' sons; when asked to spare one of them from military service the king said that he would exempt all three and flung the dead bodies of the three men before their father. Seneca exclaims ironically, 'But how much kinder was Xerxes!', before relating the story of Pythius' son, whom Xerxes had cut in two, with the two halves placed on either side of the road. Seneca goes on to point the moral that no good came of such an outburst as the army met the end it deserved, being thoroughly defeated and then having to march between lines of the dead of its own men, just as it had once marched between the halves of Pythius' dead son.[45] Here the reason adduced for such cruelty is that Xerxes and Darius were uneducated barbarian kings (3.17.1); Seneca goes on, however, to show that such behaviour is seen in the Roman world too, and expresses a wish (3.18.1) that such practices had remained the province of foreigners only; Roman citizens are thus discouraged from behaving like the monstrous Persian kings.

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[44] Elsewhere, Cicero demonstrates his familiarity with the wider traditions relating to the Persian Wars. At *Tusc.* 1.101, he gives a Latin translation of Simonides' famous epigram for the Thermopylae dead; he then refers to the Spartan who declared that if the Persians' arrows should block out the sun, all the better that the Spartans would be able to fight in the shade, and quotes the words of a Spartan woman said to have been glad that her son died an honourable death for his country. In one of his letters to Atticus (*Ad Atticum* 10.8.7) he compares his own situation with that of Themistocles, who was exiled after he made errors of political judgement.

[45] Note that here again Xerxes is presented as continuing in the same vein as his father.

Elsewhere, in Seneca's *De constantia* (4.2), Xerxes is adduced, as often, as an example of supreme arrogance, showering his arrows to darken the sky and lowering chains into the sea. Seneca refers to him here only as *stolidus ille rex*, 'that stupid king', and comments that no arrow would have reached the sun, and no chains touch Neptune; the gesture, then, was simply a vain display. Xerxes also features in Seneca's *De beneficiis* (6.31.1-12), where the king appears in an anecdote apparently designed to point a moral concerning the value of telling the truth as opposed to false flattery. Xerxes is here seen being wholeheartedly encouraged by his advisors in pursuit of the war against Greece (6.31.1-3); they flatter his ego by asserting that the expedition cannot possibly fail. Only the Spartan Demaratus warns him that the number of his forces will work against him, and that the Spartans at Thermopylae and the other Greeks elsewhere will not falter in their courage and steadfast defence (6.31.4-10). The speech attributed to Demaratus here clearly owes much to Herodotus' version of the story of Xerxes and Demaratus, and appears to be based – whether directly or indirectly – upon the conversation between Demaratus and Xerxes seen at Hdt. 7.101-5. Ultimately, Seneca tells us (6.31.11-12), things turned out as Demaratus had predicted and (an episode not present in Herodotus' account) he is rewarded by Xerxes for having been the only person to tell him the truth. The story features many of the reusable motifs relevant to Xerxes' story – the vast numbers of his expedition, which proved no match for Greek courage; the fact that although Xerxes believes he can alter nature itself ultimately nature will conspire against him; and a stereotyped image of Persian kingship in which the monarch is fawned upon by his subordinates.

Xerxes also frequently reappears as an illustration of the transience of human life and fortune, themes which, earlier in this chapter, we saw Juvenal addressing in his tenth satire. Of course the motif has its roots in Herodotus' exchange between Xerxes and Artabanus (Hdt. 7.45-7) when the king, having counted his troops at Abydus, weeps for the brevity of human life. Although not always in precisely this same guise, the theme finds its way into the works of various Roman authors. The younger Pliny did comment upon the incident as it was recorded in Herodotus; in his letter (3.7) to Caninius Rufus after the death of Silius Italicus, he offers comforting words on the fleeting nature of life, commenting that (3.7.13), 'it seems to me that those royal tears (*illae regiae lacrimae*) deserve not only pardon but even praise; for they say (*ferunt*) that after Xerxes had reviewed his vast army he wept to think of the end awaiting so many thousands so soon.' The wording of the example speaks for itself – it is clear that Pliny, writing this letter at the beginning of the second century AD, recognises how well-known the story is, but for him that does not detract from the fact that it is the perfect example to illustrate his point.[46]

Of course, even the mighty Xerxes himself was subject to the immutable laws of nature as Lucretius had reminded readers of the *De rerum natura*. There, his comments on such transience are supported by references to the deaths even of powerful and famous men. He writes (3.1029-33): 'He also – who once laid a road across the great sea, gave his armies a road to pass over the deep and taught them to walk on foot over the salty depths, despising the roars of the sea as he

[46] For a late Latin reference to Xerxes' weeping for the brevity of human life, see Saint Jerome, *Letter* 60.18, his consolation of Heliodorus over the death of Nepotianus, written in AD 396. There too Xerxes' weeping is also adduced as a reminder that all men must die.

trampled upon it with his horses – he too was robbed of the light and poured his soul from a dying body.' Once more the contrast between Xerxes' ostentatious display and his demise (this time, his actual death) is stark. Human fortunes are also shown to be transient; this is a maxim which is illustrated perfectly by the reversal undergone by Xerxes, commander of a vast army which was brought low by the Greeks. Manilius too had used Xerxes as an illustration of such reversals of fortune in his *Astronomica* (4.65-6), referring to the Persian king as 'Xerxes, whose shipwreck was greater than sea could contrive'.[47]

There were, of course, Roman writers for whom Xerxes' invasion was of more than merely passing significance in relation to their particular literary projects; we might expect that certain works in which extended discussion of the Persian Wars featured would provide a more in-depth look at the figure of Xerxes himself. In the case of the works of Cornelius Nepos (biography), the Elder Seneca (declamation) and Valerius Maximus (anecdotes for oratorical use) which deal in their different ways with aspects of the Persian Wars tradition, Xerxes does indeed appear more frequently; yet, as will become apparent, that is not necessarily to say that the king is brought to us in sharper focus.

Nepos' passive reception of the Xerxes-topoi

By chance the works of Cornelius Nepos provide us with our earliest surviving example of Latin biography. Described by Wiseman (1979, p. 157) as 'a sort of

[47] Later in the *Astronomica* Manilius also alludes to the topos of Xerxes' changing land into sea and vice-versa. In discussing the astrological sign of the Ram (5.48-9) he tells us that this is the sign under which sea captains are born; if this sign were to be taken away, 'then no Xerxes will drive Persia upon the waves or make and cover up seas.'

crash course to help the ordinary reader in a literary world where ignorance of things Greek was no longer tolerable' the extant *Lives* (only one book of sixteen survives), written in the first century BC, deal primarily with Greek leaders of the fifth and fourth centuries. Such an interest in the lives of famous men seems to have stemmed largely from the rhetorical schools;[48] the first to attempt to write biography in Latin was Varro who was said to have written seven hundred character-sketches of Greeks and Romans, although none of his work has survived. Nepos himself, although a Cisalpine Gaul by birth, was trained in rhetoric at Rome. He appears to have followed Varro in arranging his biographies in pairs of Greeks and Romans and, in this, anticipated Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* in Greek.[49] The provision of positive examples for others to follow was one of the aims of such biographical work.[50]

Inevitably, then, as the extant work of Nepos concentrates upon the lives of eminent Greek commanders as a means of providing examples of virtuous behaviour for an audience who could read only Latin, Xerxes, although he does feature in the pieces on generals of the Persian Wars (Themistocles and Pausanias in particular[51]), is never the main focus of the work. He therefore appears in a cameo role only when the needs of the 'story' being told demand his presence. Nepos appears to have derived most of his material from Greek sources

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[48] On the origins of biography at Rome, see Jenkinson 1973, pp. 705-9.
[49] Geiger 1985, pp. 117-20 discusses the possible influence of Nepos on Plutarch.
[50] Dionisotti (1988) presents an analysis of Nepos' *Lives* in relation to the political instability current at Rome at the time in which he was writing; he interprets the works as highlighting specific political issues, and as promoting '*libertas*, not tyranny, obedience in public office, not private initiative, the *civitas*, not the individual' (p. 45). The history of the Persian Wars and the lives of the Greek military commanders, from Marathon onwards, provided plenty of material for highlighting such issues.
[51] Xerxes is mentioned only briefly in the short *Life* of Aristides, where Nepos tells us that Aristides was allowed to return from exile 'when Xerxes descended upon Greece' (3.1.5).

(he mentions Thucydides several times, but not Herodotus), although not necessarily at first-hand, and has been criticised for his lack of historical accuracy,[52] but here we are concerned not with whether his numbers, dates and distances are correct, but rather with the question of the representation of the Persian king.

For Nepos Xerxes is simply a combination of the common topoi related in the works of earlier writers. The king first appears with his many hosts in the *Life* of Themistocles (2.2.4-6) where the fleet built by Themistocles with money from the silver mines at Laurium is said to have been of crucial importance for the whole of Greece during the Persian War. Xerxes, we are told, invaded Greece with a fleet larger than any seen before or since; the hyperbole continues with details of the numbers of land and sea forces being given. There is nothing new here, then; Nepos simply gives the standard representation of Xerxes' force as outnumbering that of the Greeks (the number of Greek ships is given as only three hundred at 2.3.2), and the precedent is set for his treatment of Xerxes elsewhere in the *Lives*. Our next encounter with Xerxes is one in which the Persian king performs his customary acts of supreme hybris. After Thermopylae (in the narrative of which the king is not specifically mentioned), he marches upon an empty Athens, massacres the priests on the acropolis, and sets fire to the city (2.3.1); meanwhile, of course, the Athenians have taken refuge in their ships and on Salamis. Themistocles displays his talent for deception by sending to the unsuspecting Xerxes a false message that the Athenians are about to withdraw,

[52] See, for example, Jenkinson 1973, pp. 713-14. Nepos' apparent lack of concern for historical accuracy is no doubt reflective of the Romans' concern for style rather than content in their presentation of Greek history.

thus forcing a battle in the narrows (2.4.3-5) in which, of course, Xerxes' immense numbers work against him; after the Greek victory at Salamis this is followed up with another message to the effect that the Athenians are about to destroy the Hellespont bridge.[53] Nepos claims that Xerxes made his return journey to Asia in less than a month although it had taken him six months to march to Greece initially. Ultimately Xerxes' invasion is used here to emphasise Themistocles' own intelligence and importance; Nepos comments after his account of Xerxes' retreat that 'Thus, through the sagacity of a single man, Greece was freed and Asia succumbed to Europe' (2.5.3).[54]

Nepos later asserts that he disbelieves the story that Themistocles went to the court of Xerxes, preferring to believe, along with Thucydides, that it was to Artaxerxes that he eventually fled after his banishment from Athens (2.9.1). Where Pausanias is concerned, however, Nepos does discuss the relationship of the Greek with the Persian king. Xerxes does not feature in the military exploits of Pausanias, as his hosts are commanded by Mardonius at Plataea (4.1.2), but Pausanias is said to have been personally involved with the Persian king after the battle. Nepos relates the story (4.2.2-6), as told initially by Thucydides,[55] that, having secretly sent back to Xerxes some Persian nobles captured at Byzantium, Pausanias sent a letter requesting personal alliance with Xerxes and his family; in return for the hand of Xerxes' daughter in marriage Pausanias would help to

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[53] Perhaps surprisingly, this is Nepos' first mention of Xerxes' bridge, although in the *Life* of Miltiades he had commented upon Darius' bridge across to Scythia (1.3.1).
[54] The general 'moral' of Themistocles' story appears to concern the fickleness of the masses; Nepos goes on to show how Themistocles did his best for Athens in the years after Xerxes' invasion, but that, in spite of this, he was ultimately banished because of the ill-will of his fellow citizens towards anyone with too much power (2.8.1). The same, says Nepos here, happened to Miltiades (cf. 1.8).
[55] Thuc. 1.128-9.

bring Sparta and the whole of Greece under Persian control. Xerxes, as in Thucydides' version, willingly agrees; ultimately, Pausanias is tried in Sparta and escapes, on this occasion, with a fine.

Nepos' straightforward abridgement of Thucydides' version of this story reveals nothing of any development of the Xerxes-tradition; he simply regurgitates the tale from another source. The 'textbook' account which results is symptomatic of Nepos' method of working and his aims as a writer. The *Lives* of the Greek generals is designed as a piece of instruction, to educate Nepos' fellow Romans in the ways of the Greeks, as he states in his preface (2-3), and perhaps to provide some basic subject-matter for declamation. He is concerned simply to present a concise summary of the key events in Greek history; Xerxes, therefore, is almost incidental to the main purpose of the work and so is not thought to need elaboration. As a result what emerges of the Persian king is a somewhat prosaic portrayal in which a few of the standard topoi are used to summarise his invasion of Greece. Nepos provides us here with a perfect example of the passive 'reception' of traditions as opposed to creative reworking. For a Roman citizen of the first century BC there was none of the emotional attachment to the Persian Wars tradition seen in Greek uses of the theme. Moreover, as we saw earlier, Rome also consistently proclaimed the superiority of its own military history over that of Greece; a Roman audience of Nepos' time would no doubt have little patience with elaborate declarations of Greek moral superiority over her eastern enemies of the past. It is worth remembering too that Nepos was writing in an era before imperial Rome had hijacked the Persians in order to make grandiose equations between Xerxes' invasion and her own external enemies; for him, then,

the story of Xerxes had no such resonances and therefore required no embellishment.

Manipulating history? Seneca's *suasoriae*

The remaining rhetorical works of the elder Seneca (c. 55 BC-c. AD 41) provide us with further insight into Roman usage of the Persian Wars theme as subject-matter for oratory. The practice of declamation was one of the main ways in which Romans became familiar with Greek history, and the surviving *suasoriae*, exercises in deliberative oratory, recorded by Seneca, offer two examples of debates concerning the Persian Wars. These works are a prime example of the way in which stylistic concerns were more important than accuracy of content; they demonstrate the way in which teachers of rhetoric felt free to embellish or modify real historical subjects – sometimes conjuring up dramatic situations which had never really taken place – in order to provide interesting and challenging topics for oratorical debate.

Two of the seven extant Senecan *suasoriae* deal with topics from the Persian Wars; one (*Suas.* 2) imagines a debate among the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae as to whether they should retreat or stand up and fight. The other (*Suas.* 5) imagines a situation never actually attested in the Greek historical tradition, where Xerxes has threatened to launch another invasion unless the

Athenians take down the trophies commemorating their victory over the Persians.[56] Both scenarios require a good deal of imaginative invention, and strict historical accuracy is of little concern (for example the speaker of *Suasoria* 2, although present at Thermopylae, appears to describe the area surrounding Salamis – 2.1), yet the presentation of Xerxes here conforms absolutely with earlier treatments of the Persian king.

The same clichés persist where Xerxes is concerned; in the second *suasoria* he is presented as having brought with him vast numbers of troops, yet the opening speaker, Arellius Fuscus, who maintains that the Spartans ought to stand their ground reminds the other Spartans that these numbers will work against the Persian king (2.1; cf. 2.7, where Pompeius Silo is recorded as having said, 'Xerxes brings many men with him, but Thermopylae has room only for a few'); of course the glory of the death awaiting the heroic Spartans is also adduced as a means of attempting to persuade his opponents not to desert (2.2).[57] Another speaker, Triarius, also in favour of remaining for the fight, refers as well to Xerxes' bridging of the Hellespont and canal through Athos (2.3: *sed montes perforat, maria contegit*, 'but he tunnels mountains, and bridges seas'), but asserts that such heights of arrogant prosperity simply mean that their perpetrator has

[56] Of the other five *suasoriae*, three deal with Greek topics. Two of these are based on 'historical' themes: Alexander debating whether to embark upon the sea in the hope of finding new worlds to conquer (1), and Alexander debating whether to enter Babylon although the omens foreshadow danger (4). The other is a theme inspired by Greek drama, in which Agamemnon debates whether to sacrifice Iphigenia (3). The Roman subjects of the other two debates are Cicero's consideration as to whether he should beg Antony for his life (6), and his deliberation as to whether he should burn his writings as Antony promises to spare his life if he does so (7). Bonner 1977, p. 279 points out that although Seneca's extant works are weighted in favour of Greek themes, the subjects mentioned in Latin rhetorical treatises are almost entirely derived from the history of Rome, with topics from the Hannibalic War and the civil war in particular featuring as popular subjects for debate.

[57] The Spartans' ancestral courage is also noted at 2.6.

further to fall;[58] he goes on to say that at least if the Spartans die Xerxes will have found something that he cannot change. Later Xerxes is described stereotypically as *insolens barbarus* ('arrogant barbarian', 2.7; cf. 2.22). Ultimately, in the argument for staying to fight, the Spartans are upheld as courageous freedom-fighters (2.8) in the face of their formidable and supremely arrogant Persian opponent.

In the fifth *suasoria* where the Athenians debate whether to remove their Persian War trophies in order to prevent Xerxes' return, the Persian king, although presented in relation to a totally new, invented situation, appears once more in familiar guise. The most striking image here is again that of Xerxes' numerical superiority; this is emphasised primarily in relation to the scale of the disaster which he suffered as a result.[59] Arellius Fuscus, in arguing against the removal of the trophies, dismisses the possibility that Xerxes will return, reminding his opponents of the vast numbers of forces which he lost during the invasion and imagining the distress and fear of Xerxes as he contemplates those former losses (5.1; cf. 5.2). Xerxes' dramatic reversal of fortune is emphasised repeatedly in the course of Seneca's summary of the rest of this particular *suasoria* and his former arrogance is contrasted with his imagined fearfulness after his defeat by the Greeks (5.5, 5.6). Xerxes' attempts to enslave the sea and sky with chains and arrows are also mentioned here (5.4), and Athos and the Hellespont are alluded to, if only briefly (5.7).

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[58] Xerxes also features as a paradigm of excess in Seneca's comments upon this *suasoria*. At 2.17, he relates the story of another Seneca who loved all large things and therefore admired the activities of Xerxes for their immoderation.

[59] Note, however, that Gallio, in arguing for the removal of the trophies, turned the argument concerning Persian losses on its head and commented that 'They can go on dying for longer than we can go on winning' (5.8).

The two Persian Wars *suasoriae* thus present us with an ideal example of the way in which the Xerxes-tradition was received at Rome. Oratorical usage of the theme there can be seen to have done what oratory concerning the Persian Wars had been doing for centuries since the Athenian funeral orations of the fourth century BC. In selecting the appropriate motifs in support of a particular rhetorical standpoint – whether the vast forces of the Persian king, the courage of his opponents or the ignominy of his flight – the orators who practised their skills using these particular exercises perpetuated the established Xerxes-symbolism, in much the same way as Nepos' *Lives* drew on the pool of familiar Xerxes-topoi. Although, as seen in the case of Seneca's fifth *Suasoria*, there was scope for invention in relation to historical circumstances, the fundamental aspects of Xerxes' personality remain unchanged. That history itself could be manipulated for the purposes of rhetorical exercises but that Xerxes' distinguishing features remained ever constant demonstrates just how fixed the perception of the king's personality had become.

Valerius Maximus: Xerxes as a 'cardboard cut-out'

One other author for whom the rhetorical point is more important than the historical material included in his work is Valerius Maximus. His nine-book collection of *Facta et dicta memorabilia* ('Memorable Deeds and Sayings'), dedicated to the emperor Tiberius and probably composed in the early first century AD is, as the title suggests, a catalogue of examples illustrating both good and bad behaviour as a means of providing moral instruction; the preface

speaks of displaying virtue which is to be encouraged, and vice to be censured. The work also provided useful material for declamation and it is therefore unsurprising, given the highly anecdotal nature of the collection, that the stereotyped view of Xerxes seen in the work of the Elder Seneca is also present here. For each theme Valerius gave both 'Roman' and 'foreign' examples; the Persian king appears on several occasions in the 'foreign' sections.

What we see of Xerxes here is mostly familiar from our earlier extant sources on the Persian king; he features as something of a 'cardboard cut-out', which can be wheeled out whenever a memorable example of, say, supreme arrogance or luxury is required. As usual the verdict on the king is wholly negative. Here we find once more his extreme reversal of fortune; Valerius relates the portent in which a mare gave birth to a hare (1.6 ext. 1a, cf. Hdt. 7.57.1) and which forewarned of the retreat of Xerxes, who, although he had assembled such a vast army, was forced to flee Greece like a 'fugitive animal'. In the same section on omens we learn that Xerxes ignored another portent in which wine was turned into blood (1.6 ext. 1b).[60] The incident shows the king to be both foolish and impious; Valerius comments here on Xerxes' madness in ignoring the warnings of the Magi and of the gods.

Xerxes also represents a force of destruction and enslavement, as in his removal of the statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton – widely thought to be Athens' liberators from tyranny – from Athens (2.10 ext. 1). The often-cited incidents by

[60] Although the first portent appears in Herodotus' account, Wardle 1998, p. 213 notes, concerning the omen in which wine turns into blood, 'No parallel for this is extant in Greek or Latin literature.' That is not necessarily to say, however, that the tradition was invented by Valerius; he may have been relying on a source which is now lost to us.

which the king attempted to control sea and sky with his chains and his arrows are also mentioned by Valerius (3.2 ext. 3); the two images were clearly memorable ones which could be easily wheeled out as rhetorical examples of supreme arrogance, as seen elsewhere in literature of this period (cf. Seneca *Suas.* 5.4; younger Seneca, *De constantia* 4.2). As is often the case such arrogance is contrasted here with the bravery of Leonidas' Spartans who 'reduced [Xerxes] to ultimate desperation' (*ad ultimam desperationem redegit*); Valerius is quick to point out too that the battle at Thermopylae was won only as a result of treachery.

Xerxes' arrogance is displayed further elsewhere; Valerius relates an incident (9.5 ext. 2) in which Xerxes calls upon his advisers only to effect the pretence that he is seeking counsel. The king tells his men that their function is not to advise but to obey (cf. Hdt. 7.8.δ2), an act of supreme arrogance, Valerius comments, in the light of the fact that Xerxes was so shamefully defeated! Even when Valerius relates the well-known incident in which Xerxes wept for the transience of human life (9.13 ext. 1) the author gives a hostile verdict, suggesting that Xerxes was weeping not for others but for himself and commenting upon the folly of a man who wept that he was born mortal. Finally, the luxury and extravagance of Xerxes also finds its way into the collection of anecdotes; Valerius cites the story (9.1. ext. 3), as recounted earlier by Cicero (*Tusc.* 5.20), that the king was so extravagant and ostentatious that he published an edict offering a reward to anyone who discovered a new pleasure. The writer comments here too upon the ruin of the Persian empire, with the familiar

implication that it was such extravagance which brought about the downfall of the Persians.[61]

Valerius' work thus collects in one place several of the anecdotes which, as we saw earlier, were being used by a variety of Latin authors in a range of genres over a wide chronological period. Again there is no depth to the character of Xerxes; he has become a proverbial example of the negative characteristics associated with Persian despotism since the fifth century BC in Greece. The figure of the king is utterly devoid of any real substance, but remains here the rather flat stereotype of negative behaviour – whether luxurious excess, folly or insolence – seen again and again in the Roman literature discussed in this chapter.

Everybody was talking about him…

The wide range of evidence and the sheer number of references to Xerxes discussed in this chapter creates the impression that, as Juvenal implied in his tenth *Satire*, everyone at Rome – over the course not just of decades, but of centuries – had something to say about Xerxes' invasion of Greece. The works of Roman authors were peppered with references to the Persian king; the very frequency of these mentions appears to illustrate how well the theme had become embedded in the collective consciousness of the Roman world (of which Greece was by now, of course, a key part). In this sense the Roman period as a whole

[61] The king's proverbial extravagance is also relevant to 8.7 ext. 4, where Valerius comments that the riches of Democritus were so great that his father was easily able to give a feast to Xerxes' army.

displays similarities with late fifth- and fourth-century Greece (seen in Chapter Four above) in which the Xerxes-image found its way into a wide range of sources of different genres. Latin literature, similarly, presents a strikingly stable image of Xerxes – the excessive, arrogant, hybristic enslaver – in spite of generic differences of the sources dealing with the Persian king.

This similarity with the late fifth- and fourth-century Greek sources, however, is largely superficial. Where, at that time, the Xerxes-traditions were still evolving and finding new modes of expression – as seen, for example, in the theatrical flamboyance of Timotheus' Persians, or the 'novelistic' harem-politics related by Ctesias – in Latin literature the Xerxes-tradition had ceased to be of more than passing interest. The very nature of this chapter, which at times has, of necessity, presented lists of references to the Persian king on similar themes, is a reflection of the character of the Latin material. Rarely here – if at all – does Xerxes appear as more than a one-dimensional, stereotyped exemplar whose presence in a text results merely from the need for a convenient and easily-recognisable example. Where Greek history is given more than a cursory mention – for example, in Nepos' *Lives* – still, the king is given no elaboration but is defined only in relation to the familiar topoi relating to his invasion of Greece.

In this sense, then, the traditions relating to Xerxes can be seen to have stagnated as Latin literature sought ways of presenting Rome's own history rather than that of Greece to its audience. The passive reception of the tradition meant that the hackneyed themes and common topoi flowed from the pen more easily than ever; the images of Xerxes are simply received, accepted unquestioningly and recast in

the relevant language and style to suit the needs of each author. Although, on the face of things, it appears that everyone was indeed talking about Xerxes in this period the preceding survey has shown that few have anything to say about him which has any substance. The real Xerxes, his identity once stifled by its projection through a Greek lens, has now become nothing more than a convenient literary cliché. Juvenal's satirical yawn at the familiarity of the topic has been vindicated.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Persian Peacock: Xerxes in the Second Sophistic

Juvenal's acknowledgement in Latin that the Persian Wars was an overworked theme had its Greek counterpart in the work of the satirist Lucian. Writing, like Juvenal, in the second century AD, Lucian too mocked the excessive oratorical use of references to the Persian invasion of Greece. In discoursing satirically on the themes for rhetoric, as part of his *Rhetorum Praeceptor* (18), he ironically recommended mentioning the Persian Wars in declamation as much as possible, 'advising' the speaker:

> Add to everything references to Marathon and Cynegeirus, without which you will get nowhere. Let Athos be for ever sailed across, and the Hellespont crossed on foot; let the sun be shadowed by the arrows of the Medes, and Xerxes flee, and Leonidas be admired; let the writing of Orthryades be deciphered, and let there be many and frequent references to Salamis, Artemisium and Plataea.

The profusion of references to such themes in the Greek writing of the time had its origins in circumstances markedly different from those which had encouraged the Romans to appeal so frequently to the Persian Wars. Where, as we saw in the preceding chapter, the fifth-century Persian invasions of Greece had little emotional resonance for the Romans, by contrast, for the Greeks under the empire, their ancestors' fight for freedom had never ceased to retain its significance.

It is well-acknowledged that during the period to which we refer as the 'second sophistic', roughly corresponding to the years AD 50-250, Greek culture underwent something of a renaissance. One key feature of this renaissance was the Greeks' assertion of their cultural identity through recourse to their collective past. No longer independent as they had been in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, the Greek subjects of the Roman empire (often encouraged too by a largely philhellenic Roman elite) sought authority in that past as part of the process of self-definition. This has been seen to manifest itself especially in stylistic terms, in particular through linguistic Atticism, the imitation of the style of Attic prose. However, as Bowie (1974, p. 167) has shown, 'the archaism of language and style known as Atticism is only part of a wider tendency, a tendency that prevails in literature not only in style but also in choice of theme and treatment, and that equally affects other areas of cultural activity'.[1] It is as part of this archaism in choice of theme that the Xerxes-tradition in the second sophistic must be viewed.

As the archetypal narrative of the Greeks' assertion of their liberty against a foreign invader, the Persian Wars story was especially pertinent at a time when Greece was no longer free. As Lucian's comments suggest, declamation of this period was particularly preoccupied with themes from the Persian Wars. Swain (1996, p. 93) has noted that themes for Greek declamation in the second sophistic come almost exclusively from the mythological and classical period down to and including Alexander; within this, the history of Athens – incorporating, of course, the Persian Wars – predominates.[2] This oratorical interest in what was by

[1] On the various manifestations of this preoccupation with the past, see also Swain 1996, Ch. 3.
[2] Bowie 1974, p. 171-2, points out too that, of the sophistic themes mentioned by Philostratus in his *Lives of the Sophists*, none is later than 326 BC.

then ancient Greek history is reflected too in other genres of literature of the period in which the era from Marathon to Alexander was dealt with to the exclusion of later, less glorious, periods in the history of Greece; inevitably Xerxes features as a key part of this history. The present chapter seeks to consider some of the diverse reasons as to why authors in this period chose to portray Xerxes as they do.

The wide-ranging spread of the Greek sources from the era – in terms of geographical origin, authorial background and generic concerns – allows for a broad span of insights into the figure of the Persian king. As already seen, earlier representations ensured that the reality of Xerxes had been utterly lost to history; as the barbarian enemy *par excellence*, constructed by Greeks, the king is consistently marginalised and 'othered' in the Persian Wars narratives. It will come as no surprise, then, to find that the descendants of those Greeks who fought against Xerxes were unable – or unwilling – to recover any trace of the 'real' king six or seven centuries after his invasion, working as they were within such a firmly-established tradition. In literature of the second sophistic, Xerxes continues to be marginalised in ways similar to those used by earlier Greeks, yet I suggest that the reasons for such marginalisation – and the ways in which it manifests itself – vary widely, from more complex reflections upon the Greeks' present political situation to the more straightforward demands of genre.

Melodramatic Medes

One reason for the continued popularity of Xerxes' exploits as themes in literature of the period no doubt relates to the opportunities for entertainment which they afforded. Lucian's comments refer specifically to the Persian Wars as a subject for rhetoric, and there is evidence to suggest that dramatic representations of Xerxes – as well as of his father Darius – were a common feature of sophistic declamations. Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists*, for example, offers an insight into one 'performer' who appears to have impersonated Xerxes. At *VS* 519-20 Scopelian of Clazomenae is admired for the kind of use of the Persian Wars theme censured by Lucian. Philostratus comments upon his handling of the more demanding themes of declamation, especially those relating to the Medes and involving treatment of Darius and Xerxes. Scopelian is said to have been able to enact dramatically the 'arrogance and frivolity' of the barbarian character (καὶ γὰρ φρόνημα ἐν αὐταῖς ὑπεκρίνετο καὶ κουφότητα τὴν ἐν τοῖς βαρβάροις ἤθεσιν), and Philostratus comments on his body language at these times, describing his swaying movements as being comparable to those of a Bacchant! Such a dramatic performance was clearly thought to be essential to the representation of the Persian kings. The Athenian Philostratus also records one of the witticisms of Polemo, in relation to the same topic. On meeting a sophist who was buying sausages and sprats, he is said to have commented, 'It is impossible for one who lives on this diet to act out convincingly the pride (φρόνημα) of Darius or Xerxes' (*VS* 541).[3]

[3] Other Persian Wars themes for declamation recorded by Philostratus include advice to Darius to build a bridge over the Danube, and 'Artabazus' (presumably Artabanus) trying to dissuade Xerxes from making his expedition to Greece (*VS* 575).

Schmitz (1999) has demonstrated that Greek sophistic declamations, of which those on historical themes – involving the impersonation of figures from classical history – were by far the most popular, had a significant theatrical aspect. He discusses the extravagant public appearances of performing sophists and comments that, 'Not only were the declamations sometimes produced in theaters, being a sophist entailed the creation of a public persona in a histrionic display' (p. 75). Philostratus' insight into the work of sophists who impersonated Xerxes in their declamations reflects this theatricality. The fact that the Persian kings were still deemed to be entertaining subjects with scope for melodramatic performance reflects the attitude towards Xerxes seen as early as the late fifth-century BC *Persae* of Timotheus, the citharode for whom portraying Xerxes on stage was a special stunt (see above pp. 114-15), and a challenge to the skills of the performer. In some ways, however, the declamatory enactment seen in the second sophistic was probably even more demanding than that of the tragic actor or citharode as it was performed unmasked and unaccompanied by music, and therefore presumably required more facial 'realism'.

The Persian kings were clearly still, in the second sophistic, perceived in this way as representing the very opposite of 'normal' Greek male behaviour, which is no doubt what made them such fitting subjects for displays of declamatory virtuosity. Whilst the sophists might well have been preoccupied with Xerxes, however, we must not assume that the desire to relive his invasion of Greece was universal in this period. One writer who is careful *not* to overemphasise the

figure of the Persian king is Plutarch, whose works display particular concern for the potentially negative ways in which Xerxes' invasion – and the surrounding Persian Wars narrative – might be used in the current political climate.

Xerxes disappears again: Plutarch's problematic Persian

> On seeing a great statue of Xerxes which had been carelessly overturned by a mob that had forced its way into the palace, Alexander stopped before it, and, addressing it as though it were alive, said, "Should I pass by and leave you lying there, because of your expedition against the Greeks, or, because of your magnanimity and virtue in other ways (διὰ τὴν ἄλλην μεγαλοφροσύνην καὶ ἀρετὴν), shall I raise you up again?" But finally, after communing with himself a long time in silence, he moved on.
>
> (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 37.5)

So, according to Plutarch, mused Alexander after the sack of the Persian capital by his troops. Although Alexander speaks as though the statue is alive (καθάπερ ἔμψυχον) the king whom he addresses cannot respond – he is reduced to the state of a mute object, cast aside in the fray and, it seems, forgotten by all but the Macedonian ruler.[4] The question of whether to raise up Xerxes or to discard him, as Alexander does, is one which can be seen to inform Plutarch's own treatment of the Persian king. Plutarch's sidelining of Xerxes, although strongly influenced

[4] Mossman 1991, p. 116 convincingly interprets the significance of this encounter with Xerxes' statue in relation to Alexander's own situation: 'Alexander at this point in the *Life* is presented as being gradually drawn in by the temptation of autocracy to which Xerxes was prey in Herodotus.' She looks at the episode alongside that in which Alexander refuses to have his own statue carved into Mount Athos; in *On the Fortune or Virtue of Alexander* (334f) he asserts that it is enough for Athos to remain as a memorial to the arrogance of one king (i.e. Xerxes), yet in the *Life* (72.7-8) we are told that, having rejected the idea, Alexander was engaged in far more elaborate artistic projects. The implication here is clearly that Alexander was becoming even more overweening than Xerxes at this point.

by earlier Greek traditions concerning the king, is also very much a product of his own time and his own literary project; his reasons for marginalising the Persian tyrant apparently differ considerably from those of earlier Greek treatments of the Persian Wars.

Alexander's comment on Xerxes might seem a little unusual as he alludes to the 'magnanimity and virtue' of the king; acknowledgement that Xerxes may have had any positive characteristics is a rare thing indeed. It should be noted here that μεγαλοφροσύνη (translated here as 'magnanimity') can also have a negative connotation, being used elsewhere to mean 'arrogance'. Yet, taken here alongside the positive attribute of ἀρετή (a quality more usually ascribed to the Greeks who fought against Xerxes), it is clearly intended as a compliment. Interestingly, Herodotus uses the word μεγαλοφροσύνη on different occasions with both meanings. At 7.24.1 he tells us that the digging of the Athos canal was μεγαλοφροσύνης εἵνεκεν ('on account of arrogance') on Xerxes' part, yet, by contrast, the word is later used to describe a virtuous action. At 7.136, Xerxes refuses to kill Bulis and Sperchias, two Spartans sent to Persia as reparation for the Spartans' murder of messengers sent to them by Darius. There, in a rarely-seen moment of benevolence, Xerxes is said to have behaved ὑπὸ μεγαλοφροσύνης (7.136.2). We might well wonder here how much Plutarch's knowledge of Herodotus led to his use of this particular phrasing. The story of Bulis and Sperchias does appear in the *Apophthegmata Laconica* (235f-236b) which have come down to us as part of the Plutarchan corpus.[5] There the story

[5] Note, however, that the *Apophthegmata* are not a completed work in themselves but appear to be extracts from longer works, possibly from notes taken as part of Plutarch's researches. On this aspect of Plutarch's methodology, see Pelling 2002, pp. 65-71, and for a case study of his working methods, see also Van der Stockt 1999.

acts as an illustration of the value set upon liberty by the Greeks. Xerxes admires the two men and spares them, although insisting that they remain with him. In spite of the honours offered to them, however, the two men say that no-one in his right mind would exchange his freedom for the Persian kingdom.[6]

Elsewhere in Plutarch's work we see only one other clear-cut example of what Alexander could possibly have meant by this 'magnanimity'. In discussing in his treatise *On Brotherly Love* (488d-f) the ways in which fraternal disputes, even those on a grand scale, can be resolved, Plutarch gives us an insight into the issue of Xerxes' succession. This was not merely about a small patch of land, Plutarch tells us, nor about slaves or flocks, but about the whole Persian empire. Xerxes is said to have been in competition with his brother Ariamenes for the Persian throne.[7] Here, Xerxes is described as having a typically Persian royal appearance with diadem and tiara; yet his behaviour is perhaps surprisingly benevolent. Xerxes offers Ariamenes gifts and tells him that, should he, Xerxes, become king, he will honour Ariamenes as second only to himself. Atossa, meanwhile, tells Xerxes that he need not fear the contest for the kingship, and that even second place – brother to the king of Persia – is honourable. In the event, when Xerxes succeeds Darius, he does indeed hold Ariamenes in high esteem, and, as a result, is rewarded with his brother's utmost loyalty; Ariamenes is even seen

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[6] The Plutarchan version expands on the Herodotean version of the story in which the Spartans' love of freedom is exemplified only by their refusal to perform *proskynēsis* before the king.

[7] Herodotus 7.1-4 names the son of Darius who also contested the throne as Artobazanes; no mention is made there of Xerxes' appeasement of his brother. The only instance in which Herodotus' and Plutarch's accounts overlap is where we are told that Xerxes was made king because he was born after Darius came to the throne. Cf. Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* (2.4) where we are told that Artaxerxes' succession was secured through the use of an argument like that used by Xerxes himself – that he was born whilst his father was on the throne.

fighting at Salamis for Xerxes' cause.[8] The story shows that Plutarch was not utterly averse to using Xerxes as an example, where appropriate, to demonstrate right conduct; it offers a rare glimpse of the kind of magnanimity to which Alexander refers.

Many of the topoi concerning Xerxes which we find in Plutarch's works are, however, those negative traditions which are already familiar to us from as far back as the earliest representations of the Persian Wars. Here they are usually only referred to in passing, often without comment or explanation; the fact that the author felt no need to elaborate is testament to just how well-known these themes must have been to the Greeks of the second sophistic. These are the motifs which illustrate the king's barbarian nature, his cruelty and arrogance, his ostentation or his Persian stupidity and cowardice, as contrasted with the heroic Greeks' skill in battle. Among these we see featured, for example, the by now well-worn dual image of Xerxes' crossing of the Hellespont and canal through Athos, used often to illustrate a moral point about the fragility of human fortune (*Consolation to Apollonius* 110d),[9] as an example of irrationality and ill-temper (*On Control of Anger* 455d-e), or as a sign of great folly (*On the Fortune or*

[8] The story also appears – in less detail – in one of the four *Apophthegmata* attributed to Xerxes (173b-c). As noted above (p. 242, n. 5) the relationship of these *Apophthegmata* to Plutarch's work is questionable. It may be the case that they reflect only a set of notes which can later be written up in several different ways. The other Xerxes *Apophthegmata* are as follows: 2) Xerxes' treatment of the Babylonians who had revolted; the king prevents them from bearing arms in future, and forces upon them trivial and effeminate activities: shopkeeping, and wearing long chitons. According to Herodotus (1.156), this was the punishment inflicted upon the Lydians by Cyrus. 3) Xerxes' refusal to eat Attic figs until he has acquired the land which produces them. Cf. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 14.652b-c and below, p. 282. 4) On finding Greek spies in his camp, Xerxes' decision not to punish them, but to let them go after telling them to observe his army at their leisure. Cf. Herodotus 7.146-147, where the motive for this is that the Greeks will be scared by tales of Xerxes' vast army.

[9] Cf. *On Tranquillity of Mind* 470e, where we are reminded that, although Xerxes may have seemed happy as he crossed the Hellespont, the misery of those who suffered at his hands in the building of the bridge and the Athos canal far outweighed this happiness.

Virtue of Alexander the Great 329d-f, where Alexander's joining of Persians with Greeks and Macedonians in marriage is praised as a more appropriate and joyful way of uniting two continents).[10]

Elsewhere we see standard themes being used to illustrate Xerxes' cruelty and his arrogance. For example, Plutarch relates, in his *Virtues of Women* (263a-b), the story of Pythes, who, having entertained Xerxes lavishly en route to Greece, asked for one of his sons to be spared from military service; Xerxes' enraged response was to have the son cut in two for the army to march between the two halves.[11] Plutarch goes on to relate the effect this had on Pythes, who lost the will to live.[12] This kind of cruelty, part of the barbarian stereotype which had obviously penetrated through into the consciousness of Plutarch's own day, also finds its expression in Xerxes' treatment of Leonidas' corpse after the battle of Thermopylae; this is alluded to in *On the Malice of Herodotus* (867b, cf. Herodotus 7.238).[13] The burning of Athens has not been forgotten either; in the

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[10] Plutarch's contemporary, Dio of Prusa, also used stories relating to Xerxes in order to illustrate moral points. His third discourse, concerning kingship (3.30-37), has Socrates being questioned as to whether he considers that Xerxes – a man who apparently achieved the impossible, by walking over the sea and sailing through a mountain – was powerful. This gives rise to Socrates' assertion that real strength lies in the virtues of wisdom, lawfulness and moderation. In Dio's seventeenth discourse, on covetousness (17.14), Xerxes appears as an example of what happens when human beings become too ambitious; the contrast is drawn there between the might and size of Xerxes' forces and the ignominy of his downfall.

[11] Our earliest source of many for this story is Herodotus 7.38-39, who gives the unfortunate man's name as Pythius. Plutarch adds the extra, and poignant, detail that Xerxes took the remaining sons with him, and all died in battle.

[12] This addition to the story is perhaps an invention of Plutarch, which he has added to a well-known anecdote in order to enhance his moral point.

[13] Leonidas appears too in the *Apophthegmata Laconica* where Xerxes features in two exchanges with the Spartan commander (225c), who acts there as a foil to the Persian king. In the first of these Xerxes offers Leonidas leadership of Greece in exchange for his surrender; Leonidas responds that he would rather die than be monarch over his own race. Second is the demand from Xerxes to the Spartans to hand over their arms, with Leonidas' famous response μολὼν λάβε. It is worth noting that Xerxes is distanced here; he is not described as actually *speaking* here, but as *writing down* (γράψαντος) his demands in both cases. This is a motif seen elsewhere in the Plutarchan corpus (see below, p. 249). For writing as a feature of the presentation of Xerxes by Herodotus, see above, p. 70 and p. 75.

Life of Alexander (38) Plutarch tells the story of the courtesan Thaïs who is responsible for inciting Alexander to set ablaze the Persian palace at Persepolis in revenge for Xerxes' destruction of Athens. Thaïs is said at *Alexander* 38.4 to have commented that 'it would be a still greater pleasure to revel in setting fire to the house of Xerxes who burned Athens'. She goes on to say that she wants to establish a tradition that the women in Alexander's entourage inflicted greater punishment on the Persians for the Greeks than did all of Greece's generals on sea and land. Once again we see Xerxes being emasculated; even after his death he is bettered by a woman!

As well as the image of the arrogant despot, we also find hints of the picture of Xerxes as stupid and incompetent, as contrasted with the Greeks who are known for their cunning intelligence. Themistocles, like Leonidas, acts as a foil to this tactically inept foreign despot; this is seen most clearly in Plutarch's use of an unavoidable part of the Themistocles-repertoire, with the description of the Greek commander as outwitting Xerxes at Salamis by tricking him into thinking that the Greeks are about to flee, thus causing him to fight in the narrows (*Themistocles* 12, cf. the Themistocles *Apophthegmata* 185b-c). Xerxes fails to see through the ploy, believing that it comes from a well-wisher; he is thus, in his foolishness, presented as the complete opposite of the cunning Themistocles.

In spite of the slight hints at a more positive side to Xerxes' character, then, the traditional image of the hybristic barbarian as antithesis of the virtuous Greek still remains more prominent. Still, however, the presence of Xerxes is far from pervasive. Even in the texts of Plutarch which engage directly with the Persian

Wars period (*Themistocles*, *Aristides*, and *On the Malice of Herodotus*), he is a dim figure, appearing only intermittently where the needs of the narrative require it.[14] This removal from the text is frequently mirrored in the actions of the Persian king as described by Plutarch; often when we encounter him he is in the act of disappearing, quite literally, from the scene.

Plutarch's account of the Spartans' night-time attack on the Persian camp at Thermopylae (*On the Malice of Herodotus* 866a) draws on a strand of the Persian Wars tradition which survives elsewhere at any length only in Diodorus (11.9.4-10.4).[15] Plutarch is trying to make a point here about Spartan heroism, which he claims has been underplayed by Herodotus, but for our present investigation the episode has an added source of interest. In his description of the Spartans' entrance into the Persian camp Plutarch writes:

> Forward they went, right to the tent, killing anyone in their way and routing the rest; when they failed to find Xerxes, they started hunting for him throughout his huge and sprawling army, and as they roamed around they were hemmed in by the barbarians on every side and at last with difficulty were slain.

The experience of the Spartans in their failed attempt to find Xerxes in a sense mirrors that of the reader of Plutarch (and of many other sources pertaining to the Persian Wars tradition) who goes in search of the Persian king. We are left to

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[14] This may, in part, be a result of the degree of familiarity with the Persian Wars period which Plutarch expected his audience to possess. In relation to the paired lives of *Themistocles* and *Camillus*, for example, Stadter (1984, p. 359) has noted that where Plutarch gives detailed historical narrative in the *Camillus*, he makes no effort to tell the story of the Persian Wars in the *Themistocles*: 'Because he is confident that his audience knows Herodotus and Thucydides well, Plutarch can concentrate on the essentials of the portrait.'

[15] See above, pp. 168-9. On this alternative tradition, see Flower 1998, suggesting that it originated with Simonides.

speculate as to what has happened to Xerxes; it is possible that the readers of Plutarch, as inheritors of a by now centuries-old tradition, would ascribe his disappearance to his characteristic cowardice, which is also, as we shall see, to be found elsewhere in Plutarch's portrayal of the king. In the description of the attack seen here, Xerxes remains concealed among his vast army, as seen earlier in the opening lines of Aeschylus' *Persae* – where the Chorus concentrate more upon the army and the roll-call of its commanders than the man at its head – and in Herodotus' account (7.40-42), where Xerxes marches in the middle of his army.

Elsewhere, Xerxes is also seen to be detached from the action of the war with Greece; this emphasis on his absence manifests itself in a variety of ways.[16] The removal of the king from the risks of the war is clearly apparent, as in earlier sources, with the use of the symbolism of Xerxes' throne from which he observes the battle of Salamis. At *Themistocles* 13.1, we find him seated high up (ἄνω καθῆστο) and observing the arrangement of his troops. Plutarch's use of the word ἄνω here places added stress on Xerxes' removal from the action; he is observer from afar, rather than active participant. We read that a golden stool has been set down for the king; here the emphasis on Persian ostentation, as represented by the gold, recurs.[17] We are then told that Xerxes had many

[16] In a manner similar to his disappearance from the Persian camp during the Spartan night attack, we are given another story, in the *Parallela Graeca et Romana* (305d-e), in which Xerxes' absence saves his skin. We are told here that Xerxes and his army had anchored near Artemisium, and declared war on its inhabitants; Agesilaus the Athenian is sent out as a spy, and mistakenly kills one of the king's bodyguards, thinking him to be Xerxes.

[17] It was thought by the Greeks that it was forbidden for the Persian king's feet to touch the ground, but that they had to be 'protected' by a footstool or carpet. Frost 1980, *ad loc.* makes it clear that the δίφρος to which Plutarch refers here is a stool, not a throne, as it has often been mistranslated. He argues that the stool, on to which Xerxes could descend from his chariot, could be easily moved so that Xerxes could observe the battle from different points. This notion reinforces the impression of the king as spectator rather than participant.

secretaries standing by to write down the events of the battle. The irony here is pointed; although it is the Persian here who makes use of writing in order to memorialise the events our accounts of Salamis have reached us only from a Greek perspective.[18]

Later in the account of the battle of Salamis as related in Plutarch's *Themistocles*, we are given further confirmation, from the Greek perspective, of Xerxes' separation from the thick of the battle. After Xerxes has been defeated the Greeks debate whether to cut him off in Greece or to let him go home. Aristides argues that if they break the Hellespont bridge and thus force the king to stay with his army in Greece, 'he will no longer sit under a golden parasol and view the battle at leisure (ἐφ' ἡσυχίας), but will dare all things and be present himself' (*Themistocles* 16.3). This time it is a parasol of gold which symbolises the Persian's luxury and leisure, and here he is emphatically presented as watching rather than doing, with the use of the verb θεάσεται. The king is a mere idler, unaffected by the action of the battle; ἐφ' ἡσυχίας lays stress on his leisured enjoyment of events. In spite of Aristides' assertions that the king will take action and begin to participate in person, we remain unconvinced – the idea of the Persian ruler actually risking his own neck in battle seems absurd in the light of the recurring images of his removal from the scene.[19]

This removal is taken a step further in Plutarch's narrative accounts of what happened after Salamis. In his discussion of Athenian naval power in the opening

[18] See Steiner 1994, p.144 on the act of writing as distancing a tyrant from his subjects. For further discussion of the theme, in relation to Herodotus, see above, p. 70 and p. 75.
[19] There may be a hint here – for those readers who knew their Herodotus – that the presence of Xerxes was intended to inspire fear in his men and thus spur them into action.

chapters of the *Themistocles*, Plutarch asserts that the Greeks' salvation came from the sea (4.5), and that 'Xerxes himself bore witness to this. For although his infantry remained unharmed, he fled after the defeat of his ships, because he thought he was not able to fight the Hellenes, and he left Mardonius behind, as it seems to me, rather to obstruct their pursuit than to enslave them' (4.6). As we have seen in many other sources, Xerxes thus completely absents himself from the scene once again before the final showdown at Plataea; the notion that Mardonius was left to prevent the Greeks from following the king's army creates an impression of cowardice on the part of Xerxes. His departure from Greece is elaborated upon later in the *Themistocles*, with the story of Themistocles' false message to the king that the Greeks intend to destroy the Hellespont bridge in order to obstruct his escape (*Themistocles* 16, cf. Herodotus 8.110). 'When the barbarian heard this he was terrified and speedily began his retreat', writes Plutarch (16.6).[20]

This image of the cowardly barbarian running away is clearly a remnant of earlier Greek tradition; Xerxes is once more reduced to a figure of ridicule. The motif recurs once more in the *Aristides*, where the story of Themistocles' false message about the Hellespont bridge is again related (*Aristides* 9.5-6), and Xerxes' reaction is described in language similar to that in the *Themistocles*. 'Xerxes became terrified at this, and hurried immediately to the Hellespont; Mardonius was left behind with the army's finest, three hundred thousand men'

[20] Later in the narrative of the *Themistocles* Plutarch is unable to say with conviction whether it was to Xerxes or to his son Artaxerxes that Themistocles later fled (*Themistocles* 27.1); as a result he simply avoids naming either king in the narrative which follows, instead referring only to 'the king'. See Russell 1972, pp. 58-9. Diodorus' version, in which Xerxes and Themistocles come face-to-face, is discussed above (pp. 169-70).

(*Aristides* 10.1). Once again Xerxes lives up to the image of the cowardly Persian. This is captured perfectly in a fragment of Plutarch (fr. 140 = Stobaeus 4.29.22) which points the moral that nobility does not lie in wealth, and contrasts Xerxes, explicitly described here as a coward, with Cynegirus, brother of Aeschylus, who died fighting at Marathon: 'Perhaps you believe that Xerxes was nobler than Cynegirus? Yet the latter lost his hand on behalf of his own country, while Xerxes fled for his life, adorned with great cowardice rather than with the marks of a great kingdom.'[21]

In this way, then, Xerxes is quite literally taken out of the picture, and his disappearance from the action at key points mirrors his general absence from the writings of Plutarch. On one level this removal of the Persian king from the spotlight can be seen as a continuation of earlier traditions, yet the absence of any detailed examination of some of the more prominent aspects of Xerxes' character as seen elsewhere – his cruelty and sacrilege, for example – is puzzling. Plutarch, as we saw, drew to a limited extent on the figure of the king as set against Leonidas and Themistocles, yet nowhere does he explore the well-known figure of the brutal and impious enslaver as the antithesis of the virtuous Greeks whose country he invades. That Plutarch was capable of using the kingly opponents of the subjects of his *Lives* in such a way as to draw such contrasts is illustrated well by the *Life* of Aemilius Paullus. Most of this *Life* is concerned with Aemilius' campaign against Perseus of Macedon; here the figure of Perseus is painted in such a way as to suggest interesting comparisons with the virtuous Aemilius, whose moral courage is emphasised throughout. The Roman general's

[21] The juxtaposition of Xerxes-topoi with Aeschylus' brothers was one found also in the fictional 'Letters of Themistocles', on which see further below, p. 284, n. 61.

successes are attributed to his bravery, his planning, the support of his friends and his good counsel in the face of danger (*Aemilius Paullus* 12.2); Perseus, as set up against him, has – like Xerxes against the Greeks – the forces to outnumber Aemilius (13.4), although his love of money is such that he is presented as being too parsimonious to pay his mercenaries (12.3-12). A contrast is also drawn in relation to the way in which the two men respond to adverse fortune;[22] whilst the Macedonian meets his defeat with cowardice, by comparison, Aemilius demonstrates his own moral dignity when fortune throws its worst at him and his two young sons die.

In relation to Persia specifically, such a contrast between adversaries may be seen, although it is developed less elaborately, in Plutarch's *Alexander*, where Alexander's behaviour differs strikingly from that of his adversary Darius. For example, Alexander is commended for his restraint in all matters – at 22-23 in particular – by contrast with the luxury and wealth of Darius, as seen at his palace (20.11-13). The Persian king is especially surprised at Alexander's kindness (30, where Alexander gives Darius' wife a royal burial although she is one of his captives), which results in his prayer to the gods that no-one but Alexander should sit on the Persian throne.

Not only was Plutarch willing to produce such comparisons between individuals featuring in a *Life*, as well as exploring in some detail the relationships of those characters, but he also gave one Persian king, Artaxerxes II, a *Life* of his own. This particular *Life* is fascinating for the insight which it lends into the harem

[22] Swain 1989 (b), p. 325.

politics and political intrigue at Artaxerxes' court – here contrasted with the generally favourable verdict which Plutarch pronounces on the king himself – yet it begs the question of why, when there were so many comparably interesting traditions surrounding Xerxes, Plutarch chose never to discuss in any detail, or focus upon for any length of time, the leader of the second Persian expedition against Greece. The answer may lie, in part, in the familiarity of Plutarch's audience with the figure of Xerxes and the writer's wish not to be seen to cover old ground (or in a recognition similar to Lucian's that the theme had been overused) – yet this did not prevent Plutarch from re-examining the traditions relating to, for example, Themistocles, which must surely have been equally well-known. It seems more likely that his presentation (or non-presentation) of Xerxes is bound up with the political situation of Plutarch's own time.

By the time Plutarch was writing, centuries of Greek literary tradition praising and commemorating the defeat of the Persian invader had cemented the symbolic link between Xerxes and the threat to Greek liberty; here was a commander from a mighty foreign power intent on taking over the Greek world and making her inhabitants subject to his country's laws and form of government. For Aeschylus, Herodotus and their successors in the fifth and fourth centuries BC the literary erasure of Xerxes was a necessary aspect of their disparagement of the Persian enemy – another means of humiliating the already defeated barbarian. In Plutarch's day, however, circumstances had changed and there were now new political reasons for not dwelling too long upon the monarch who was seen to be set upon world domination. Greece *was* by now subject to a powerful foreign government: the Roman empire. Within this political structure, Greek local

government was allowed a certain degree of freedom, yet there were limits to this. In his *Political Precepts*, addressed to Menemachus, a Lydian seemingly contemplating a career in local politics, Plutarch reminds his friend of the situation of one in such a position (813d-e):

> When entering upon any office, you must remember those considerations of which Pericles reminded himself when he assumed the cloak (of a general): "Take care, Pericles, you are ruling free men, you are ruling Greeks, Athenian citizens", but you must also say to yourself, "You who rule are a subject, ruling a state controlled by proconsuls, the agents of Caesar".

Plutarch thus shows himself to be acutely aware of the problematic issue of the extent of Greek freedom at this time. This is a theme which recurs most prominently in two of the parallel lives, the paired *Philopoemen* and *Flamininus*. These two *Lives* give us an insight into the very beginnings of Roman domination of Greece.[23] Philopoemen, 'last of the Greeks' (*Philopoemen* 1.7), asserted Greek liberty at Mantinea (206 BC) and thus earned for himself a comparison with the ancestors who fought against Persia. Plutarch relates how, as he entered the theatre at the Nemean Games of 205 BC, the opening verse of Timotheus' *Persians*, 'Fashioning the glorious crown of freedom for Hellas', was being sung. At this all turned to Philopoemen and applauded him (*Philopoemen* 11). We are later told that Philopoemen spent his latter years trying to maintain the liberty of Greece in the face of the Roman intruders; in what appears to be a reminder to his own contemporaries, Plutarch notes, however, that, like a good helmsman, even Philopoemen knew when it was appropriate to yield

[23] For a clear discussion of the paired *Philopoemen* and *Flamininus* in relation to the question of Greek freedom, see Pelling 2002, pp. 243-247, along with Pelling 1989, pp. 208-210.

(*Philopoemen* 17.3). Flamininus, by contrast, is the agent of the Roman power which Philopoemen resists; by a curious paradox, he too is responsible for Greek freedom with his declaration of Greece's liberty from Macedon at the Isthmian Games of 196 BC (*Flamininus* 10.4-7). As Pelling (2002, p. 244) points out, the question of the 'freedom of the Greeks' was still delicate in Plutarch's day – in AD 67 Nero had proclaimed the freedom of Greece at Corinth (*Flamininus* 12.13), although this was later revoked by Vespasian. Swain (1996, p. 149) notes that 'Plutarch was naturally aware that Flamininus' proclamation of liberty was really as short-lived as Nero's, and that, however just Flamininus' actions were, Roman intervention against Macedon entailed the subjection, not the liberation, of Greece'.[24]

In this context of Roman domination, then, spirited assertions of Greece's successful resistance to an invader who threatened to deprive her of her freedom might seem inappropriate, to say the least. Although the Persian Wars were still being referred to by both Greeks and Romans,[25] Plutarch shows himself to be acutely aware of the fine line which may be being trodden with references to the liberation of Greece by the ancestors. In the *Political Precepts* (814b), he advises on the appropriate use of examples from the Greek past by a politician, giving a list of examples of Greek clemency such as the amnesty after the downfall of the Thirty Tyrants: 'By emulating acts such as these it is even now possible to resemble our ancestors, but Marathon, the Eurymedon, Plataea and all the other

[24] On Flamininus in the Latin tradition, see above, pp. 197-8.
[25] On the Romans' own cultivation of links with the Greeks who fought against Persia, see above, pp. 196-205. Spawforth 1994, p. 245, notes that this appropriation of the past could have been an attempt by Rome to neutralize a potentially subversive thread in Greek usage of the Persian Wars tradition during the imperial period.

examples which make the masses vainly swell with pride, should be left to the schools of the sophists' (814b-c). As Pelling (2002, p. 245) notes, 'Plutarch clearly hopes his audience will be too sensible to assume too close a correlation between the glorious deeds of the past and anything that might be practicable in present circumstances'.

Too much stress on the past, then, might well lead to the equation of Roman rule with the ancient threat of Persia, and the possibility of Greek rebellion; as his comments in the *Political Precepts* show, Plutarch was keen that the Greeks should learn to live with their situation. As Plutarch writes there (824c), the Greeks have as great a share of liberty as their rulers grant them; more may be dangerous. Resistance may well lead to the restriction of this liberty. Elsewhere, he notes that Greek contentiousness has been harmful in the past, commenting that 'if one excepts the action at Marathon, the sea-battle at Salamis, Plataea, Thermopylae, and the achievements of Cimon at the Eurymedon and around Cyprus, Greece has fought all her battles to bring servitude upon herself' (*Flamininus* 11.6). He goes on to say that Greece owed her overthrow to the contentiousness (φιλονεικία[26]) of her leaders, and that ultimate liberation from tyrants came from men who were not Greeks – the Romans. This is especially true in Plutarch's *Life* of the elder Cato in which the Roman statesman's victory over Antiochus at Thermopylae in 191 BC (*Cato Maior* 13-14) clearly evokes

[26] On the etymology of the word, see Pelling 2002, p. 345 (with p. 347 n. 24 for a list of examples), who notes that it can mean either 'love of quarrels', deriving from νεῖκη, or 'love of victory', from νίκη.

memories of the even more famous Greek military action there in the past.[27] The situation is thus paradoxical; it would seem that the Greeks are being warned against displaying their characteristic contentiousness towards the Roman rulers who are ultimately responsible for the degree of freedom enjoyed by Greece.

What, then, were the implications of this delicately balanced political situation for the presentation of Xerxes by a Greek writer living under the Roman empire?[28] First, it may explain Plutarch's willingness to attribute some positive characteristics to the Persian king, as well as the ambivalence which he presents Alexander as displaying towards Xerxes. If it was the case that comparisons were going to be made between imperial rule and Persian power, then perhaps the damage could be limited by suggestions that even the Persian ruler possessed some benevolent qualities. The possibility of the equation of Persia and Rome does arise in this period; it seems, for example, that the two powers were, on occasion, described in Greek discourse using the same political terms; Jones (1986, p. 56 with n. 51) examines the way in which Lucian, for example, uses in his *Toxaris* Greek terms usually reserved for Persia in relation to institutions of the Roman empire. Most notably, the emperor is referred to here as the 'great king'; this clearly allows for the possibility of a negative comparison with Xerxes, or indeed any other Persian king.

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[27] In a paper given at Durham in July 2003 Christopher Pelling suggested that Plutarch's reference, in the Aristides/Cato *synkrisis*, (2.3) to Cato's having 'driven Asia out of Greece' was perhaps an echo of a Simonidean verse on Thermopylae of 480 BC; he noted that the formulation was similar to that appearing at *Themistocles* 16.3-4 and *Aristides* 9.5 in which Themistocles suggested 'trapping Asia in Europe' (by destroying Xerxes' Hellespont bridge), and suggested that this indicated a common source, familiar to Plutarch's audience. See Pelling (forthcoming).

[28] As noted earlier, Plutarch could and did draw more elaborate images of barbarian kings, seen in the case of *Artaxerxes*, and in the Darius of *Alexander* and the Perseus of *Aemilius Paullus*. In all of these cases, however, the barbarian in question had not posed a threat to Greece in Greek territory – for Darius and Perseus, it was their territory which was being invaded by outsiders. Unlike Xerxes, then, their relationship with Greece could not be equated with Roman rule.

Elsewhere, there are other verbal echoes; Swain (1996, p. 176, with n. 125) comments on Plutarch's phrase at *Political Precepts* 814c τῶν ἄνω δυνατωτάτων ('the most powerful people up there') to refer to Rome, where ἄνω 'recalls the manner of referring to Persia and upland Asia'.[29] The remaining evidence shows that Xerxes himself seems to have been alluded to in negative contexts where certain Romans were concerned; Plutarch, when describing the building projects of the wealthy Lucullus, tells us that Tubero the Stoic referred to him as 'Xerxes in a toga' (*Lucullus* 39.2-3).[30] The comparison is made as Lucullus is said, as Xerxes did with his bridging of the Hellespont and canal through Athos, to have changed land into sea and vice versa by building elaborate channels around his private estates. Still, then, the connotations of referring to the Persian king were primarily negative.

The removal of Xerxes as much as possible from Plutarch's narrative, whilst it follows the precedent set by earlier authors, also avoids the possible problem that parallels may be drawn between the Persian king and the Roman emperor. The cursory treatment of the king, which manifests itself in the disparate nature of Plutarch's references to Xerxes, and his literal disappearance from the scene on several occasions, allows him to fade into the background. This symbol of enslavement is thus marginalised as far as possible; the guiding principle of Plutarch's treatment of him seems to be 'out of sight, out of mind'. For Plutarch, a Greek citizen who also enjoyed the benefits of Roman rule, and recognised that

[29] See also Duff (1999, 296) and Bowie (1974, n.95), who comments on the use of terminology such as 'satrap' in relation to the Roman administration.
[30] See above, p. 204, on the comparison of Lucullus with Xerxes in Latin discourse.

there was a place in the world for the great men of Rome just as for those of Greece,[31] the dangers of stirring up potentially subversive feelings of patriotism were clear. For this reason he, like the Alexander of his *Lives*, chooses not to resurrect Xerxes but to leave him aside, detached from the main narrative as far as is practicable. Other writers of the second sophistic were not always so cautious.

Glorifying Athens again: Aelius Aristides

Aelius Aristides provides us with an ideal example of the kind of usage to which Plutarch was referring when he commented that reference to the Persian Wars should be left to the schools of the sophists. One key aspect of the recourse to the Greek past which was such a crucial feature of literature of the second sophistic is the emphasis on the admiration of Athens, her role as a centre of Greek civilisation and her achievements in the classical period.[32] Aristides originated not from the Greek mainland but from Hadrianoutherae in Mysia, and later spent time as a teacher of rhetoric at Smyrna. He was nonetheless able to appreciate the tradition of Athenian greatness and, as a result, to produce his *Panathenaicus*, a rhetorical panegyric in honour of Athens.[33] The piece, in the tradition of oratorical encomia such as those produced by Isocrates in the fourth century BC, is a classic example of the archaising tendencies of this period, which are

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[31] The paralleling of Greeks and Romans in the *Lives* is the clearest expression of Plutarch's willingness to acknowledge Rome's ability to produce statesmen of equally high moral standing; as Swain (1996, p. 139) comments, 'there is no evidence that he thought one group of heroes superior to another'.

[32] See Bowie 1974, pp. 195-203.

[33] There is some debate as to the date of the *Panathenaicus*. Behr 1968, p. 87, dates the delivery of the oration at Athens to August of AD 155 (supported by Bowie 1994, p. 210). Oliver 1968, pp. 33-4, however, examines the evidence and suggests that composition of the piece took place between AD 165 and 170.

reflected in both its linguistic style and its content. Although the piece is ostensibly concerned with Athens as a cultural centre, the orator also ventures in lengthy detail into Athens' glorious military history, and war becomes as important as the arts. This concern with the glorious past is no doubt a reflection of the fourth-century models which were so familiar at this time; Aristides gives an extended narrative of the Persian Wars which had of course featured as a key part of the rhetorical catalogue of Athenian exploits seen in Chapter Four above.[34]

Where Xerxes is concerned Aristides does exactly the kind of thing which Lucian professed to find so tiresome, using every cliché possible relating to the king's arrogance, his sacrilege and the fear which he inspired in the fifth-century Greeks. Xerxes' invasion is initially contextualised in relation to that of his father. Whilst Darius' expedition is described as the first contest of virtue (*aretē*) against barbarian numbers and preparations (*Panath.* 107) Aristides explicitly states that Darius did not make the crossing to Greece himself (96); this immediately puts Xerxes' arrogance in a different league. We are later told that Xerxes, more excessive than any other king, was scornful of his father's failed attempt and resolved to outdo Darius by launching an invasion that would be successful: '[Xerxes] was so excessively hybristic (τοσοῦτον ὕβρισε τῇ ὑπερβολῇ) that he decided to make the former expedition seem like child's play' (115). The father/son comparison mirrors that seen in Aeschylus, in which Xerxes is criticised for his excess which went beyond anything displayed by

[34] Hall (forthcoming) argues that Aristides was also using Aeschylus' *Persae* as a source for his *Panathenaicus*.

Darius, as opposed to the Herodotean image of the king as simply imitating his father's exploits.

Aristides goes on to say that not only did Xerxes vie with his father, but he competed with the very elements of nature itself (116). There ensues an extended catalogue (116-124) of Xerxes' misdemeanours in which his offences against nature are given pride of place. This constitutes a more lengthy and detailed exploration of Xerxes' motives and actions than we have seen in any source for several hundred years. Aristides' account is, however, simply a reworking of all of the Xerxes-topoi taken together, as opposed to the much shorter, more anecdotal reflections on the Persian to which we have now become used. The orator appears to have collected as many examples of Xerxes' arrogance as possible, and here assembles them together to remind us of the man-monster of the early Greek traditions. The hyperbolic rhetoric seen here is a sensationalist reproduction of Xerxes' actions; this creates the kind of drama of which sophistic declaimers were said to have been so fond (116):

> It seems to me that Xerxes vied not only with his father but also with the omens of Zeus, and with every sight and sound unanticipated by man, as if he wished to show that the earth was in his power. For what onslaught of waves, or what thunderbolts or earthquakes, what attack of clouds or hail, or what strange stars did he not diminish? Or what terrors on land or sea did he not reduce with those he created?

We then (117) hear of the demands for earth and water which Xerxes made upon the Greeks, and his desire to make them his slaves; here Xerxes' overweening pride even stretches to his assertion that he is descended from the gods. The king

threatens to bring with him more ships than the sea can hold, to cover Attica with cavalry and infantry, to burn sanctuaries, and to break open tombs. The familiar sacrilegious despot, bent on enslavement and destruction, has resurfaced yet again.

Aristides goes on to relate Xerxes' contempt for the natural world, and the vast scale of his expedition; the king, we are told, dried up the rivers with his expedition (120), and land and sea were too small to hold all of his forces (121). His alterations at the Hellespont and Athos are summarised: 'For land came into being, and was destroyed, and the sea made way and was again brought together for the king' (121); Athos, we are told, remains as a reminder of his deed.[35] This is placed alongside an image of Xerxes' excessive wealth and extravagance (122); his camels are said to have shone with gold and silver, and, claims Aristides, if he desired shade he found it under a golden tree. As in so many treatments of the invasion the king is also said to have been able to change day to night, with a volley of arrows, and his army was so huge that he had to measure it in groups of ten thousand, as described by Herodotus (7.60).

Such an extreme portrayal of the evils of the Persian king is symptomatic of a speech in which the aim is to praise the Athenians who fought against him. The exaggerated account of Xerxes' excesses is set up entirely as a means of commending Athens for her response to the Persian invasion; whilst other cities trembled before Xerxes Athens displayed steadfast resistance from the start (124). As one might expect of a eulogistic speech, Athens' virtues and courage

[35] The Hellespont and Athos are mentioned again at 127.

are praised *ad nauseam* throughout. Aristides asserts (129) that '[Athens] should not be called the first of the Greek cities or the one especially responsible for freedom, but rather the only one'; there ensues a list of Athens' contributions to the Greek cause, including a comparison with those who fought at Thermopylae (131). The orator points out that some fled from Thermopylae in a cowardly manner, and that those who remained were unable to reproduce the victory achieved by the Athenians at Marathon;[36] he uses this as proof that no other city in Greece could equal Athens (132), and goes on to applaud Athens' role at Salamis (133). Xerxes is mentioned briefly here, but merely so that Aristides can suggest that, no matter what outrages he perpetrated against the Athenians, he could never take away their honour (ἀξίωμα). Thus, the Athenians are everything that Xerxes is not; once more, as in many of the fifth- and fourth-century Greek sources, the king is seen to be a photographic negative of the attributes of his opponents.

Familiar motifs abound in Aristides' Salamis-narrative, too. The Herodotean notion of the king as leisured observer rather than active participant, seen most recently in Plutarch's treatment of Xerxes, resurfaces pointedly; Aristides' account of Xerxes' behaviour at Salamis appears to be a summary of Herodotus' version of the story (8.86-90 in particular), featuring as it does many of the key points found there. We are told that Xerxes, on seeing the wrecks of his fleet, was witness to 'dreadful sights, totally at variance with his haughtiness and luxury' (162), and later that, 'Xerxes sat, richly dressed, on the mainland as if he were holding a contest, or were a judge from heaven, thinking that the fear he

[36] For praise of the Athenians' role at Marathon, see 110.

inspired would suffice' (166). His only action was to show anger towards some of his men, and to honour others.

This motif of royal absence is compounded when Xerxes once more takes to cowardly flight (166):

> When he saw that the sea was seething with blood and foam, and that everything was full of corpses and wrecks, and that the enemy had more power to inspire fear in his own people and himself, he was terrified and thought that the city could work wonders; he sang a recantation (παλινῳδίαν ᾖδεν) and turned and left by the same route, but not with the same display, and now with just one object – to get to his bridge.

The reversal of Xerxes' fortunes is complete, with the fearsome figure yet again reduced to a pathetic deserter who turns on his heel and runs from the scene of battle.[37] It is, of course, the Athenians – supremely brave by contrast – who are seen to have brought about this transformation. One particularly interesting detail given by Aristides here concerns Xerxes' singing before he retreats. No earlier prose account gives this specific detail, and it may simply be a metaphor for Xerxes' admission of his defeat, but we might also speculate as to the possibility that Aristides was influenced – whether directly or indirectly – here by dramatic or poetic treatments of Salamis, such as those of Aeschylus and Timotheus.[38]

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[37] The absence of Xerxes is emphasised again at 170, when Aristides tells us that Mardonius remained in Greece.

[38] On the significance of singing – as opposed to prose speech – as part of the portrayal of Xerxes, see above, p. 57. Xerxes, in Aristides' version, is given no direct speech, nor are the words of his song related here.

By defeating Xerxes Athens, we are told, 'saved the whole of Greece' (πᾶν ἔσωσε τὸ Ἑλληνικόν, 167). This is perhaps where Aristides' concern with war overlaps with that for the artistic and cultural contribution of Greece to the civilised world. τὸ Ἑλληνικόν, the concept of 'Greekness', as defined famously by Herodotus at 8.144.2 in relation to shared blood, language, religion and customs, was clearly a preoccupation of the Greek writers of the second sophistic, who sought to assert their identity through recourse to Hellenic cultural supremacy. By asserting that the Athenians saved τὸ Ἑλληνικόν in the face of Xerxes' invasion Aristides implies that, had the Persians been successful in their attempt to dominate Greece, this Hellenic culture would have ceased to exist. The construction of Xerxes here, therefore, as representative of the barbarian culture which would have taken over, is necessarily part of the construction of the Greek (and specifically here, Athenian) identity; the Persian invasion, over six centuries before Aristides was writing, had been the key moment in the creation of this identity.

The distinction between Xerxes, the supreme barbarian, and the Athenians, as representative of Hellenism, is made explicit in the context of the king's last-ditch attempt to gain control when Mardonius persuades him to send envoys to Athens after his departure from Greece (172-6, cf. Hdt. 8.136-144). The Athenians were offered control of Greece as well as a huge financial inducement to enter into an alliance with the Persian king; as we know from Herodotus, Alexander of Macedon, who headed the embassy, was given short shrift by the Athenians. Aristides sums up the episode as follows (177):

> [The Athenians] remained undefeated by gold, silver, iron and all things,

> and they made it all equally useless to the king, as if it were still hidden beneath the earth, as they honoured poverty above wealth, chose danger over safety, and justice over such benevolence from the king.

The ultimate contrast is made here between Xerxes, the representative of Persian luxury and injustice, and the Athenians, for whom virtue and integrity are all-important.

The representation of Xerxes as the inverse of the Athenian character, rather than as defined in his own right, is wholly in the tradition of the panegyrics which Aristides seeks to imitate here. The genre within which the orator was working thus determined his selection of material in relation to his portrayal of the Persian king; if he overuses the clichés that is because his literary predecessors had done the same, and stylistic imitation must necessarily involve the use of similar subject-matter. As Plutarch suggested, in other genres, such unequivocal praise of the liberators of Greece and absolute condemnation of her oppressor may well be taken as a comment upon the current state of affairs, in a time when Greece was no longer free; it might be possible for those ill at ease with Roman dominion to utilise the Xerxes-figure as a means of criticising the present-day world conquerors. Aristides' exercise, however, was intended as a scholarly display of his ability to imitate the great orations of his classical predecessors, one which along the way demonstrated the cultural supremacy of Athens. He had also composed a panegyric *To Rome*, which had been delivered before the imperial family, as well as others for the cities of Cyzicus, Corinth, Rhodes and Smyrna. Praise of Athens and criticism of her Persian invader, therefore, was not

incompatible with admiration for Rome in a rhetorical context.[39] This was not necessarily the case with all authors of the second sophistic, however, as an examination of Pausanias' treatment of Xerxes will show.

Pausanias' Persian hooligan

Like Aelius Aristides, Pausanias was born outside mainland Greece, probably originating in the Lydian city of Magnesia ad Sipylum.[40] His *Periegēsis*, written in the second half of the second century AD and published around AD 180, was, however, the product of extensive travels around the Greek mainland. Although the work gives an account of the Greek world of his own day, much of what Pausanias describes was firmly rooted in the past; the monuments which he viewed evoked memories of the past, and therefore his recording of them necessarily involved some description of that past. In this sense his work was very much a reflection of the contemporary preoccupation with Greek history. Bowie (1974, pp. 188-9) notes that the *Periegēsis*, as part of a genre whose roots can be seen in early Ionian periegetic literature, is archaising in both treatment and content with its Atticizing language and often Herodotean phrasing. One facet of Pausanias' concern with the past is also, as has often been noted, his neglect of monuments and works of art later than the third century BC.[41] Habicht (1985, pp. 102-4) has demonstrated too Pausanias' lack of interest in Greek

[39] Oliver 1968, p. 38, discusses Aristides' sympathy for Rome and asserts that, at a time of war between Rome and Parthia, Persia, as criticised by Aristides in the *Panathenaicus*, could be equated with the Parthians here too. He summarises Aristides' view as follows: 'The Roman Empire protects the spread of Hellenic civilization in all directions. Romanization is not itself civilization but security. The center and ancient core of true civilization lies at Athens.'
[40] Arafat 1996, p. 8; Swain 1996, p. 331.
[41] Bowie 1994, p. 212.

history after 146 BC, when Corinth – and with it the remnants of the Achaean League – was destroyed, and Greece came unequivocally under Roman control. Habicht shows that this selectivity is linked with Pausanias' patriotism and his concern that Greece was no longer free, suggesting that Pausanias' response to the undeniable fact of Greek domination by Rome was 'to ignore it as best he could' (p. 104).

As Elsner (1992) has demonstrated effectively, Pausanias' work was constructed in such a way as to foster a sense of Hellenic identity, seeking authority in the past. As a result the Persian Wars – the point at which the Greek identity first began to crystallise – naturally loom large in his narrative. Alcock (1994, pp. 251-2) has shown that in Athens alone, as seen in Pausanias' first book, the Persian Wars monuments take pride of place. Not only were the visible signs of the Greek resistance to Persia in the past important, but Pausanias also displays a consistent interest in the role of particular states and individuals in the defence of Greek freedom against the Persian invasion; so significant was a city's role in the war even six centuries after the events.

Pausanias frequently passes comment on whether an individual state medised or was loyal to Greece.[42] At 9.1.3, for example, he remembers that the Plataeans fought alongside Athens against Mardonius, and at 9.32.5 he relates the story of the people of Haliartus in Boeotia who sided with the Greeks; as a result a

[42] Habicht 1985, p. 107 n. 41 lists the occasions where Pausanias records on which side various states fought during the Persian Wars. Cf. Alcock 1994, p. 254.

division of Xerxes' army overran and burnt both their territory and their city.[43] Meanwhile, the Thebans are still tainted with the stain of their ancestors' medism at Plataea (9.6.1-2), and Pausanias feels the need to comment that the Achaeans played no part in the defence against Xerxes (7.6.3). Individuals and groups within states can also be condemned or praised for their role in relation to the Persian threat; Pausanias' list of Greece's traitors (7.10) includes the Samian captains who defected at Lade, thus bringing about the defeat of the Ionian revolt from Darius, and the Aleuadae in Thessaly who co-operated with Xerxes. Similarly the benefactors noted at 8.52 include Miltiades, Leonidas and Themistocles.

Within Pausanias' Persian Wars narratives the figure of Xerxes inevitably appears on occasion in relation to the events or monuments being discussed. As in many of the other sources we have looked at the references are often fleeting, without detailed exposition which lends any particular insight into the characterisation of the king. For Pausanias certain places on his tour of Greece take on particular significance as a result of their association with the Persian invasion under Xerxes; he notes, for example, the defeat of four hundred of Xerxes' forces on Psyttaleia after the naval battle at Salamis (1.36.2), comments that the mountainous part of Thrace breeds lions which attacked the king's army and camel-train (6.5.4) and, at 3.12.6, tells us that the Hellenium in Sparta was

[43] The incident is also mentioned at 10.35.2. Habicht 1985, p. 99 demonstrates that Pausanias was mistaken in his attribution of the incident to the Persian invasion; in actual fact, Haliartus was burned by the Romans in 171 BC during their war with Perseus. It appears that Pausanias had read that the incident took place ἐν τῷ Περσικῷ πολέμῳ, and taken it to mean 'during the war with Persia' instead of 'during the war with Perseus'. His readiness to assume a connection with the Persian War, however, is indicative of the significance which he attaches to Xerxes' invasion.

where the Greeks debated how to resist Xerxes.[44] Later, the area around Mount Pelion is accorded particular significance (10.19.1-2) as this is where the diver Scyllis and his daughter Hydne are said to have aided in the destruction of Xerxes' fleet, which had already been beset by a storm; the pair, using their diving skills, removed the ships' anchors to help nature along (cf. Hdt. 8.8.1).[45] On one occasion (8.42.8) Xerxes' invasion is also used to place the reign of Hieron of Syracuse in its chronological context. Certain monuments viewed by Pausanias have a particular association with Xerxes too; at Athens, for example, Pausanias claims that there is still a copy of Xerxes' tent near the sanctuary of Dionysus and the theatre (1.20.4),[46] and the altar to Helius Eleutherius (god of freedom) in Troezen is said to have been built because the people there had escaped being enslaved by Xerxes and the Persians (2.31.5).

None of these instances reveal to us a great deal about the presentation of Xerxes' personality, although hints are given elsewhere. Pausanias' narrative of Thermopylae characterises the king as 'the most arrogant of all who reigned over the Medes or the Persians who came after them, and the achiever of such brilliant exploits' (3.4.8); the writer is quick too to point out here that the Persians only defeated Leonidas and his men as a result of treachery. Elsewhere Xerxes' excesses feature as a point of comparison for the activities of others. Tissaphernes the Persian, who was defeated by the Spartan Agesilaus, is said to

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[44] Alcock 1994, pp. 255-6, notes that Pausanias claims that at the Hellenium a debate also took place among the Greeks who sailed to Troy; this is one of the ways in which he forges links between the Trojan and Persian Wars as key events when barbarians were overcome by Greeks.
[45] Pausanias tells us that the Amphictyons dedicated statues at Delphi in honour of Scyllis and Hydne; significantly, Nero was said to have removed the statue of Hydne. It is possible that Pausanias' narrative was modelled on that of Xerxes-the-hooligan here (on Nero and Xerxes, see below, p. 276).
[46] See above, p. 27, with n. 6, on Xerxes' tent at Athens.

have a fighting force whose numbers were surpassed only by the expedition of Xerxes and those of Darius against the Scythians and Athenians (3.9.6). Xerxes' notorious cruelty is also used to emphasise the disrespectful action of Lysander after the battle of Aegospotami (9.32.9). We are told that Lysander put to death the Athenian general Philocles along with four thousand other prisoners; he also refused them burial afterwards. Pausanias comments that even the Persians who landed at Marathon were given a proper burial by the Athenians, and, moreover (a detail not recorded by Herodotus and which may be a later invention), even Xerxes buried the Spartans who fell at Thermopylae. The fact that even Xerxes, so renowned for his severity, is said to have paid his enemies this respect, makes Lysander appear even more despicable here.

By far the most significant theme in terms of Pausanias' representation of Xerxes, however, is the king's destructive behaviour during his invasion of Greece. The concentration on this wanton violence surely stems, at least in part, from Pausanias' interest in the Greek sanctuaries and their religious monuments and dedicated artworks, many of which were vandalised or stolen in the course of the Persian attack. Paradoxically, in these material environments Xerxes left very real physical marks as the sites of Greece were scarred by the visible hiatuses caused by the king; this is in stark contrast to the nebulous and evasive figure of the literary texts. As a result the king appears most frequently in Pausanias' work in the guise of the sacrilegious destroyer, a persona of which hints have already been seen in the narratives of Herodotus, Diodorus and Strabo in particular.

Pausanias' tour of Greece often brings him to places where important statues have been stolen and he is moved to comment upon these thefts. The first instance is Xerxes' removal of the statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton from Athens (1.8.5), said to have been restored later by Antiochus.[47] Although the figures, unlike many of the statues mentioned in such a context by Pausanias, are not religious artefacts, they carry particular significance as the two men whom they represented were popularly believed at Athens to have brought down the Pisistratid tyranny at the end of the sixth century BC. For Xerxes to have carried away these symbols of freedom was an action illustrative of his perceived ideological opposition to the Athenian values of liberty. Such theft is one of Xerxes' specialities in Pausanias' narrative; the king is also accused of having taken to Ecbatana a bronze Apollo from the Branchidae (1.16.3 – the statue is said to have been sent back later for the Milesians by Seleucus). This particular theft is mentioned again at 8.46.3 along with the theft of the image of Artemis from Brauron as part of the spoils taken from Greece by Xerxes.[48]

When he was not stealing, Xerxes appears from Pausanias' account to have spent a lot of time engaged in vandalism, usually by burning down cities or sanctuaries. The statues of Athena – the goddess who symbolises everything which Athens represents – are said still to be in a fragile state in Pausanias' day because they caught fire during Xerxes' sack of the city (1.27.6). Other acts of

[47] The return of these statues is credited to different individuals – Antiochus, Seleucus or Alexander – by various accounts; see Bosworth 1980, p. 317 (attributing the restoration to the joint reign of Antiochus I and Seleucus I).

[48] In a tradition not recorded elsewhere, the second-century Latin author Aulus Gellius attributes another major theft of cultural significance to Xerxes; in his *Noctes Atticae* (7.17.1) he alleges that, when Xerxes burned Athens, he removed all of the books from the public library there and took them to Persia.

hooliganism perpetrated by the king include the burning of certain Phocian cities (10.3.2), which, says Pausanias, made the cities in question even better known. The irony here is clear; Xerxes' attempts to efface physical structures did not delete the reputation of the cities' inhabitants; by contrast it is the Persian king himself who has suffered *damnatio memoriae* through the Greek sources. Specific locations are named, including Parapotamii (10.33.8 – here Pausanias refers to Herodotus, who lists the Phocian cities destroyed by Xerxes' army at 8.33) and the sanctuary at Abae, which was burned down (10.35.2). Here Pausanias contrasts the respect shown to the god at Abae by the Romans, who, out of reverence for Apollo, gave freedom to the people there. Arafat (1996, p. 188) has shown that this passage is reflective of Pausanias' respect for Hadrian, perhaps the most philhellenic of the Roman emperors, who declared the people of Abae free and built a temple there.[49] Hyampolis too is described as having been burned by Xerxes – and later razed to the ground by Philip of Macedon – although Pausanias writes that there still remained some structures there in his day (10.35.6).

This wilful destruction of property, including as it does a disregard for the gods and all things sacred, is of course part of the wider image of the hybristic Xerxes. The king's army too are tainted with the stain of such sacrilege; at 10.7.1, for example, 'part of Xerxes' army' is included in the list of people who have plotted against the sanctuary at Delphi. The irreverence continued even after Xerxes

[49] On Pausanias' favourable attitude towards Hadrian, see also Bowie 1994, pp. 221-4. The philhellenic gesture for which this emperor was best known was the foundation of the panhellenium, a pan-Greek council instituted at Athens in AD 131/2. As well as showing that they had favourable relations with Rome, prospective members must also demonstrate their Greekness in respect of race and culture. See Spawforth and Walker (1985 and 1986).

himself had left Greece. A story told by Pausanias at 9.25.9 also illustrates the disrespect for sacrosanct places which seems to have been a general characteristic of Xerxes' whole army. Xerxes' men, we are told, when they were left behind with Mardonius in Boeotia, entered the sanctuary of the Cabeiri. Pausanias says that perhaps they were seeking wealth, but concludes that it is more likely that they wished to show their disrespect for the gods. The transgressors received their just deserts, however, as all were immediately struck with madness and flung themselves to their deaths in the sea or from the top of cliffs there. The gods are seen here to have exacted their revenge, apparently confirming Pausanias' opinion that the Persians' actions, as an extension of their king's arrogance, were intended as offences against Greek beliefs.

Where the destructive and impious behaviour of Pausanias' Xerxes becomes particularly interesting, however, is in relation to the wider context of other incursions on Greek territory. Alcock (1994, pp. 256-7) has noted that the Persian Wars are often linked in Pausanias' narrative with the Gallic invasion of Greece in the third century BC.[50] She writes that, with these events (p.258),

> The fundamental paradigm established is that of rejection of the barbarian, and thus the maintenance of a boundary between Greeks and those they oppose. Preservation of identity is located in the preservation of self-defined boundaries; the repulsion of Persians, and associated 'others', from Greek soil becomes a metaphor for this process.

[50] We might compare here Polybius' discussion of past situations where the Greeks successfully resisted barbarians (2.35.7-8); having narrated the Roman defeat of the Gauls in the 220s BC, he gives two examples of Greek defence against outsiders: the Persian invasion and the Gauls who attacked Delphi in 279 BC.

Alcock interprets this, quite rightly, as a response to a period in which, with Rome as the dominant power, 'notions of Greek identity were under stress'; reminders of the repulse of various barbarians helped to reinforce this identity. Of course, although the Greeks had successfully fought off both Persian and Gallic invasions, by the time in which Pausanias was writing they had long ago succumbed to domination by that other world-conqueror, Rome.

The Romans too had been responsible for actions which were not always respectful to the Greeks' homeland and beliefs. Habicht (1985, p. 122, with n. 19, giving specific examples) notes that Romans had plundered Greece of thousands of works of art, taken from smaller cities as well as from the major centres of Greek civilisation – Athens, Olympia, Delphi and Corinth. One passage of Pausanias in particular is edifying here. At 8.46 we are told of Augustus' removal of the image of Athena Alea from the sanctuary at Tegea, along with the tusks of the Calydonian boar, after his defeat of Antony and his Arcadian allies. Pausanias comments that the Roman emperor was not the first to take cult objects from a defeated people, but that he was following a precedent: the Greeks too took such artefacts from Troy, the migrating Dorians took them from Omphake to Sicily, the Persians stole them from Greeks, and other Greeks too – Argives and the people of Cyzicus – had been known to carry them off from the territory of their Greek enemies. He concludes that Augustus was merely practising an ancient custom carried out by both Greeks and barbarians. As examples of Persian theft from Greece Pausanias here gives Xerxes' removal of the image of Artemis at Brauron and a bronze Apollo from Branchidae after accusing the Milesians of cowardice in a naval battle (8.46.3). Here the writer is

treading on dangerous ground; although he does not explicitly condemn Augustus' actions – and indeed cites even Greek examples of such behaviour – the fact that one of the precedents cited is that of Xerxes, the most hated invader of all, has strong implications for a comparison of Roman domination with the Persian invasion of 480 BC.

At 10.7.1, too, there is a comparison of Roman and Persian sacrilege; this is far more critical in tone. In the context of a description of Crius of Euboea's pillaging of the sanctuary at Delphi, Pausanias lists others who have been responsible for such attacks. The list includes the Phlegyan people, Achilles' son, 'part of Xerxes' force' (καὶ δυνάμεως μοῖρα τῆς Ξέρξου), the Phocian chieftains and the Gallic army, which, as seen earlier, was often portrayed as similar to Xerxes' invading force. The list concludes with the violation of the sanctuary by the emperor Nero: 'it was not to be that [Delphi] should remain untouched by the utter contempt of Nero, who robbed Apollo of five hundred bronze statues of both gods and men'. The similarities in Persian and Roman behaviour seen on these two occasions contrast with the stress at 10.35.2-3 on the Romans' respectful treatment of the sanctuary at Abae as differentiated from Xerxes' incineration of the temple there. This may well be a result of the fact that Pausanias' attitude to individual emperors varies, often in relation to their behaviour towards Greece, her culture and her sacred sites: as Elsner (1992, p. 18) points out, for Pausanias, Romans can range from paragons of virtue, like Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, to exemplars of evil, such as Sulla, Nero and Caligula.

The question of Pausanias' attitude towards Roman domination has been much-discussed, and is perhaps best summed up by Habicht (1985, p. 120):

> Pausanias may not display open hostility toward the Romans, but he does show plenty of resentment and animosity, though not because they are Romans but because they dominate Greece. He resents the imperialistic policy of republican Rome, and he laments the fact that it is the fate of Greece to be ruled by foreigners, even if under the foreigners Greece is peaceful and prosperous. Roman rule is just as deplorable as Macedonian rule.[51]

Thus, Pausanias' attitude towards Rome was far from black-and-white, and, as Bowie (1994, p. 218) has noted, within this there was scope for criticism or approval of individual Romans; this may well explain the different ways in which Roman emperors' actions in Greece can be related to Xerxes' activities. The destructive Xerxes is clearly a negative paradigm as Pausanias' reference to his activities at Abae – contrasted specifically with those of Hadrian there – shows.

In this way Pausanias' work demonstrates that, as Plutarch had suggested, there was indeed a strong possibility for subversive use of the Xerxes-tradition. Although he never explicitly declares that the actions of a Roman emperor warranted a negative comparison with Xerxes, his presentation of parallels in relation to Roman and Persian destructive tendencies suggests that the reception of Xerxes did have the potential to be used by the Greeks as a means of

[51] For a similar view, see Bowie 1994, p. 216.

criticising their latter-day conquerors who may well have been seen by some to differ from Xerxes only in that they had been successful where he had failed.

The folly of Xerxes

The second sophistic sources with which we have been dealing so far present somewhat serious images of the Persian king, with the emphasis mostly upon his ferocity and strength, his sacrilegious and destructive power and his defeat by the Greeks. Other genres of literature from this period, however, appear to have been more flippant in their presentation of a flamboyant figure with an often humorous image. Such an interest in the bizarre and the exotic, although its roots can be traced as far back as Herodotus, can perhaps be related to the particular fascination with other peoples and places which developed under the Roman empire, and which is reflected most obviously in the Greek novel which flourished in this period and whose fictional plots were usually set in a pseudo-historical Greek past and often involved travel to foreign lands.[52]

The 'othering' of Xerxes, as supreme representative of the barbarian in Greek thought, had manifested itself in earlier sources too in two distinct, but interrelated, ways. Whilst the fear which the Greeks had felt at the Persian onslaught resulted in the presentation of the king as a terrifying, cruel and sacrilegious despot, there was also scope – as a result of the king's humiliation at the hands of the Greeks – for ridiculing him, both as a coward, and as displaying behaviour perceived in the Greeks' eyes as utterly absurd. The Latin sources

[52] See, for example, Bowersock 1994, pp. 29-53, and below, p. 284.

discussed in the previous chapter tended to concentrate primarily on the more dominant figure of Xerxes-the-villain with little evidence of anecdotes concerning his ridiculous behaviour as a source of humour. Whilst this remains the most common image in Greek writing under the empire certain genres of Greek writing of this era did also draw upon the image of Xerxes-the-fool.

One such source is the *Varia Historia* ('Historical Miscellanies') of Aelian, who was writing in the late first and early second century AD.[53] This work is a collection of anecdotes often moralising in tone, not dissimilar to Valerius Maximus' collection in Latin of memorable deeds and sayings. When Xerxes appears in Aelian's work it is most often as a source of ridicule. Here, for example, we learn in more detail of the story of Xerxes' love for a plane tree, as alluded to by Herodotus (7.31.1). Aelian (*VH* 2.14) explicitly states that Xerxes was 'ridiculous' (γελοῖος), contrasting his grand projects for the alteration of nature by which he 'despised sea and land, and the work of Zeus', with his love for a plane tree which he came across in Lydia. Having encamped around the tree, Xerxes adorned it with expensive ornaments and left a guardian to take care of it, 'as if it were a woman he loved'. As Aelian goes on to point out, this was of absolutely no benefit for the tree as a tree's beauty lies in its natural appearance.[54] The plane tree episode is mentioned once again later (9.39) as part of a list of ridiculous and strange examples of love, along with a young man of Athens who loved a statue of Fortune and decorated it in a manner similar to Xerxes'

[53] Although the work was written in Greek, Aelian actually came from Rome; the anecdotal nature of his work is very similar to that seen in other Roman authors under the empire, which perhaps goes some way towards explaining his particular selection of genre and material.
[54] Xerxes' apparent 'love' for the plane tree may well have originated in some kind of Persian tree-cult. See Briant 2002, p. 235.

adornment of the plane tree, and a range of individuals who loved – or were loved by – various animals.

The absurd behaviour of Xerxes is seen elsewhere in Aelian's work too, with a comment on the luxury and pretentiousness of his supply train at *VH* 12.40; so extravagant were the king's preparations that he was even said to have brought with him water from the River Choaspes (in Susa). The anecdote appears to relate to a passage in Herodotus (1.188.1-2) where the fifth-century historian alleges that all Persian kings drank only water from this river; the fact that, by Aelian's time, the generic story had become attached specifically to Xerxes is a reflection of that king's paradigmatic association with excessive luxury. The ridiculous Xerxes becomes something more sinister, however, when we read the story of his violation of the tomb of the god Belus at Babylon (*VH* 13.3).[55] Here we are told that the king dug into the tomb and found a glass sarcophagus in which the body lay in olive oil. The sarcophagus was not quite full with oil and an inscription read that things would not turn out well for whoever opened the tomb and could not fill it. No matter how much oil he poured into the sarcophagus Xerxes was unable to make the level rise. Aelian notes that the prediction inside the tomb was correct as Xerxes gathered seventy myriads of men against Greece and came off worst; moreover, he 'died a most shameful death', murdered in his bed by his son.[56] The tale is one in which the king is indeed humiliated on all counts, suffering both an embarrassing defeat and an

[55] The episode was mentioned in Ctesias' *Persica*: *FGrH* 688 F 13.26 (21). See above, pp. 129-30.

[56] Aelian records what is perhaps a confused version of the tradition preserved by Ctesias (*FGrH* 688 F 13.32-33 (28-29)) that Xerxes was killed by the eunuch Aspamistres, who then persuaded Artaxerxes that Darius, Xerxes' other son, had killed his father.

ignominious death; here this is presented as the consequence of his having insulted a god, and of his arrogance in launching the expedition against Greece.

Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*, probably completed towards the end of the second century AD,[57] also presents anecdotal evidence of Xerxes as a figure to be derided, usually as a result of the king's frivolous behaviour and his taste for luxury. As a series of dialogues thematically linked by their convivial setting, the work includes discussion of history, philosophy, medicine and the law among other things, although the anecdotes which feature in the piece are often connected by the topic of food and drink. Xerxes is mentioned in passing on two occasions,[58] but the lengthier stories about him relate to his role as a representative of the stereotyped luxurious Persian lifestyle. Here selection of such material is determined by the genre of the work; there is ample scope for the inclusion of stories relating to the king's excess. At 4.146a-b, for example, Athenaeus presents an insight into the legendary scale of the hospitality needed to sustain Xerxes' army en route to Greece. We are told that the Greeks who entertained the army were reduced to such dire straits that they lost everything. According to Athenaeus, the Thasians had to spend four hundred silver talents when they received Xerxes' army; gold and silver vessels were provided for the Persians to dine from, and 'If Xerxes had eaten there twice, taking breakfast as

[57] Athenaeus is unusual among our second sophistic sources in that he came from Naucratis in Egypt.

[58] At 5.209d Athenaeus quotes an epigram describing the Sicilian ship 'Syracusia', whose anchors are said to be secured with cables 'like those with which Xerxes bound together the twin passage of Abydos and Sestos'. At one point too, Xerxes' expedition is used as a means of relative dating; Gelon is said to have dedicated a tripod and a gold Nike at Delphi 'at about the time when Xerxes was making his invasion of Greece' (6.231f). The Persian king's gift of Lampsacus, Magnesia and Myus to Themistocles is also mentioned (1.29f), but as Athenaeus does not give the name of the king in question we cannot be sure whether he related the anecdote to the reign of Xerxes or to that of Artaxerxes.

well, the cities would have been ruined' (4.146b). Athenaeus' use of the example perpetuates the tradition of the Persian king as a waster with his huge and ostentatious entourage; the story hints too at gluttony.[59] As further evidence of such proverbial Persian luxury, Athenaeus goes on to cite Herodotus concerning the extravagant annual banquet held by the Great King on his birthday, on which occasion gifts are given to his subjects (cf. Hdt. 9.110).

As well as such extravagant wastefulness, Athenaeus adds to the list of examples of Xerxes' extraordinary behaviour an incident in which the king demonstrates his territorial ambition in relation to the food he eats. Where Aelian (*VH* 12.40) had noted that Xerxes refused to drink water which originated anywhere other than the River Choaspes Athenaeus quotes a story from Dinon's *Persica*, asserting that the king refused to consume any foreign food or drink (14.652b-c). When one of his eunuchs (symbolic, as ever, of the effeminacy of Xerxes' court) brought him Attic figs for dessert, Xerxes is reported to have asked where they came from. He gave instructions that no figs should be bought from Athens until such time as he could seize them without paying for them, that is, until he was in possession of the land himself. According to Athenaeus the eunuch is said to have given him the figs to remind him to undertake the expedition against Athens.[60] Of course, the story makes Xerxes seem idiotic as hindsight shows that the king was a fool to think that he could become master of Greece so easily.

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[59] Philostratus *VS* 494 also relates to the excessive needs of Xerxes' entourage. As proof of the vast wealth of Protagoras' father Maeander, Philostratus notes that Maeander was able to entertain Xerxes.

[60] The story is related also in the Plutarchan *Apophthegmata* (173c). It is reminiscent too of Herodotus 5.105, in which Darius is said to have asked one of his servants to remind him of the Athenians every day, thus encouraging him to punish Athens for her role in the Ionian revolt.

Athenaeus also refers to Dinon's *Persica* as evidence for the lascivious female influence at Xerxes' court. Here we are given a glimpse of the kind of harem atmosphere seen in Ctesias' *Persica* with the comment that Anoutis, the wife of Bagabazus, and a half-sister of Xerxes by the same father, was 'the most beautiful of the women in Asia, and the most licentious'. The familial association of Xerxes with such female sexual profligacy hints at the kind of household politics and pernicious feminine presence emphasised in earlier sources hostile to Xerxes and seen as symptomatic of the period of decline which his reign was thought to represent. For works anecdotal in nature such as those of Aelian and Athenaeus such snapshots relating to Xerxes are ideal material as they are memorable to both author and audience. Their often light-hearted tone leads to an emphasis on the more frivolous aspects of the Xerxes-traditions and results in an image of an often foolish figure to be mocked more than feared.

The Persian peacock

The second sophistic has thus presented us with a range of Xerxes-types which mirrors the span of images of the king seen across all earlier periods. Plutarch's removal of the Persian king to the periphery of his discourse, although apparently the product of a very different literary and political agenda, was foreshadowed by the Aeschylean Xerxes, who appeared only on the fringes of the action; Aristides' ferocious and overwhelming opponent of Athens has as its literary predecessor the Xerxes of the fourth-century Athenian orators; the destructive violator of sacred and secular property seen in Pausanias' guide to Greece is related to that figure as hinted at first in Herodotus' account but later seen most notably in

Strabo's *Geography*; and the ludicrous character, of interest for the novelty-value of his un-Greek behaviour, was heralded long ago in the works of both Herodotus and Ctesias. What all of these apparently disparate images have in common is that they consistently detach Xerxes from the reality of the world of the writers in whose works he appears. The Persian king is, as always, othered, marginalised and ventriloquised so as to deprive him utterly of any plausible subjectivity or voice.

The literary construction of the Persian king in this period continued to fascinate and entertain, with even different types of imagined narratives being magnetically attracted to the archetypal stories and images relating to Xerxes. Two such literary genres which we know to have drawn on the Xerxes-tradition for inspiration were 'romantic' fiction and *ekphrasis*-writing.[61] Chariton's novel *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, for example, has as one of its characters the Persian king Artaxerxes who falls in love with the female protagonist. The presentation of this Persian king with his luxurious court, his eunuchs and his uncontrollable desire for Callirhoe undoubtedly owes much to the way in which Persian monarchs had been portrayed in Greek literature since Xerxes' invasion. The

[61] A writer of yet a third type of prose fiction – the epistolary novel – also seems to have been stimulated by the story of Themistocles' relationship with the Persian monarchy. The 'Letters of Themistocles' is a fascinating 'historical' novel consisting of the exiled Themistocles' imaginary correspondence. Since Xerxes is less prominent than Artaxerxes here, however, and since the date of this work may be as late as the ninth century AD (see the discussion in the edition of Doenges 1981, pp. 59-63, although he favours an earlier date), it has been omitted from the present discussion. See also Lenardon 1978, pp. 154-93.

novel's hero, in raising an army of Greeks against the Phoenician city of Tyre, also recalls the Greeks' achievements against Xerxes (7.3.9-10)![62]

Meanwhile, the *Imagines* of the Lemnian Philostratus, in which the author makes literary play with Greek prose descriptions of pictures he purports to have seen, include among their number one image whose subject is Themistocles at the Persian court (2.31). There the Greek is apparently being received by Artaxerxes (although the text does not make explicit which king is intended); the Persian king seen in the image is described as being 'like a peacock' – that most ostentatious of birds – in his luxurious and elaborately decorated garments. Moreover, he is seated on a golden throne, wearing a tiara, and surrounded by eunuchs; the whole court is said to be spangled with gold. The image is a striking reminder of the influence wielded by the Xerxes-traditions, in which motifs long since associated with the most notorious Persian king are transferred even to an imagined painting featuring his son. This 'Persian peacock' is one more symbol of the Greeks' construction of Xerxes, and a fitting reminder of the futility of the search for the real Persian king.

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[62] Chariton's novel has often been interpreted as a literary construction of the contrast between Greekness and barbarism (e.g. Bowie 1991, pp. 188-192, Bowersock 1994, pp. 41-2). Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* too draws on stereotyped images of Persians, with Arsace, the lascivious wife of a Persian satrap, desiring the novel's Greek hero, Theagenes, and plotting ruthlessly against his beloved, the chaste Charicleia. Anderson 1984, p. 48, has noted the Herodotean texture of the *Aethiopica*.

CONCLUSION

The Search Continues

The Xerxes-tradition does not evaporate with the decline of classical literature; far from it. The range of topoi surrounding the hated barbarian invader, symbolic in the Greek cultural encyclopaedia of the arrogance, hybris and cruelty of extreme despotism, as well as of the kind of outlandish and often ridiculous behaviour associated with 'other' cultures, has remained strikingly rigid, long after the original production of Aeschylus' *Persae* or the composition of Herodotus' *Histories*. The stereotypical image of the eastern despot who had threatened to enslave Greece, in spite of its remarkable stability – as seen over the course of the eight centuries which have formed the basis of the present study – has proved to be readily assimilable to a variety of different historical circumstances and cultural media. The post-classical reception of Xerxes merits an exploration comparable in detail and size to the present study; art, poetry, novels, drama and even films have continued to articulate the Persian Wars narratives.[1]

In this sense, then, our search for Xerxes is far from over. There is, however, a far more fundamental sense in which the quest to find the Persian king can never reach a conclusion – one which I hope has been illustrated in the preceding discussion. As has been shown the figure of Xerxes must always be perceived through layers of a tradition which originated in a cultural climate whose very existence was defined in relation to its experience of Xerxes' expedition. Where

[1] For an insight into a sample of the different modes of political usage which have developed around the figure of Xerxes in the post-Renaissance western tradition, see Clough (forthcoming).

no mention of the invasion of Greece is made in the extant Persian evidence the perspective on the king seen in almost every Greek source – as well as in those created by other western inheritors of the Greek tradition – is wholly a product of the beliefs which were moulded as a result of that invasion. Even those works which do not concentrate specifically upon the events of the attack, but which deal with the supposed personality of Xerxes as seen in the context of his own court, undoubtedly owe their judgements to notions of barbarism conceived in response to the Persian onslaught. We are therefore wholly at the mercy of the Greeks' ideological construction of this barbarian king, modelled as the antitype of the virtuous Greeks who had resisted his attempt to enslave them.

These cultural responses to Xerxes take the form of a series of recurring topoi which appear time and again. Often they take the form of snapshots, memorable anecdotes which have deeply penetrated the collective memory. Xerxes' bridging of the Hellespont, his canal through Athos, his burning of Athens and the throne on which he sat at Salamis are all examples of such images, and all are symbolic of aspects of Xerxes' personality as constructed by the Greeks. The simplicity of this repeated usage of stock images, however, contrasts with the extraordinarily paradoxical presentation of the king. Xerxes can be the fearsome oppressor who tortures human beings and destroys all that they hold sacred, yet he can also be the frivolous and effeminate oriental prince, languishing in his harem, surrounded by eunuchs (as in Ctesias' account) and concerned only with the pursuit of pleasure and luxury. The terrifying despot who enslaves even the very elements of nature itself is elsewhere the leisured idler, sitting on his throne or under a golden parasol viewing the bloody conflicts before him like a spectator at

the theatre. Equally, Xerxes can represent both overwhelming military force, able to muster an army of millions, and utter tactical ineptitude, outwitted by Themistocles at Salamis. What results is a portrait of a man apparently viewed with ambivalence by the Greeks; fear and derision combine to present a king who is built up as the archetype of all that the Greeks despise. The dread which Xerxes inspired could be converted to humour as the king was enfeebled and mocked. We might compare recent responses to television appearances of Saddam Hussein, in which the former dictator was seen to appear as an ailing old man; this, we were told, was the state to which the western campaign had reduced him.

One thing which the different Xerxes-images have in common, however, is their consistent distancing of their subject from the world by which he was being defined. This distancing may take the form of a literal removal from the text – as in the case of Aeschylus' *Persae*, or the works of Plutarch – or from the immediacy of the situation described therein, as seen in the Herodotean use of the king's throne to detach him from the action of the battles, or in Xerxes' flight from Greece to his homeland – the world of the 'other' – which recurs frequently. Elsewhere such detachment may take on a more subtle aspect with the presentation of the king as a passive recipient of others' advice, or as a mere shadow of his father (whether as a Herodotean 'carbon copy' with no ideas of his own, or as the wholly inadequate successor depicted by Aeschylus).

The most striking form which this detachment takes is, however, the process by which Xerxes is presented as existing outside the realm of 'normal' behaviour,

that is, morally correct and rational action as defined within the culture of the writer who delineates the image. Whether this outlandish behaviour takes the form of the whipping of the sea and the beheading of human beings, or is seen in the king's love for a plane tree and his exotic banquets, each and every image is a product of a Greek ideology which strives – whether consciously or unconsciously – to place Xerxes on the periphery. All of these methods of banishing the king to the fringes of discourse deprive the king both symbolically, and often literally, of his own voice. The voice which articulates the images of Xerxes is always that of the culture which was victorious both in the war with Persia, and in the prevalence of its traditions.

Once this negative formulation of Xerxes as the universal other had been constructed in the Greek psyche there was no going back. Only the work of Josephus and the Biblical *Esther* – both of which, as created within a Jewish cultural setting, stand outside the mainstream Hellenic tradition – suggest to us an alternative perspective, lending an insight into the possibility of a favourable historical verdict on Xerxes and therefore illustrating 'what might have been'. The dominance of the Greeks' cultural legacy, however, has ensured that theirs is the perspective through which Xerxes has become universally viewed. Although glimpses of a more positive alternative do very occasionally appear even within the Greek tradition – best represented by the Herodotean Xerxes' reflections upon the transient nature of human life – these are stifled by the predominant image of the barbarian hate-figure. The search for Xerxes may continue, yet, without a personal record from the Persian king's own perspective, will surely fail to find any objective historical reality. What originated as a discourse of triumph over a

foreign enemy and developed into a fundamentally prejudicial view of all which that enemy came to represent in the Greek imagination has ultimately made the task of finding the authentic 'I'-voice beneath these layers an impossible one. Xerxes' silence, despite all appearances to the contrary, is total.

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